



The
BORDER·BOYS
ON·THE·TRAIL
FREMONT·B·DEERING

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21

Ralph Bennett



"NOW!" HE YELLED, AND AT THE SAME INSTANT THE
RELEASED LOOP WENT SWIRLING THROUGH THE AIR.

—Page 36.

THE
BORDER BOYS
ON THE TRAIL

BY
FREMONT B. DEERING

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. ON THE BORDER	5
II. THE BOYS FIND TROUBLE	21
III. A RACE FOR LIFE	35
IV. THROUGH THE GREAT DARKNESS	48
V. THE RUSTLERS AT WORK	65
VI. TAKING UP THE TRAIL	79
VII. IN THE HANDS OF THE ENEMY	94
VIII. BLACK RAMON'S MISSION	104
IX. A MOMENTOUS INTERVIEW	115
X. IN THE BELL TOWER	125
XI. A DROP IN THE DARK	138
XII. A RIDE FOR THE HILLS	150
XIII. THE HERMIT OF THE CAÑON	160
XIV. TRAVELS WITH A MULE	173
XV. A GATEWAY TO FREEDOM	186
XVI. SHORT RATIONS	200
XVII. THE TALE OF A MULE	212
XVIII. THE TREASURE OF THE MISSION	222

CHAPTER	PAGE
XIX. JIM HICKS, PROSPECTOR	234
XX. RALPH A TRUE HERO	247
XXI. AT THE IRRIGATION DAM	262
XXII. A BOLT FROM THE BLUE	278
XXIII. WITH THE RURALES	287
XXIV. THE ROUND-UP	295

The Border Boys on the Trail.

CHAPTER I.

ON THE BORDER.

“Maguez! Maguez!”

The trainmen began hoarsely shouting the curious-sounding name of the small frontier town near the Mexican border, in the southwest part of New Mexico. Slowly the long dust-covered Southern Pacific express rolled imposingly into “Mag-gay,” very slowly, in fact, as if it did not wish to tarry in that desolate, sun-bitten portion of the continent.

As the brakes began to grind down, one of two boys of about seventeen, who had been lounging on the shady side of a forward sleeper, awoke from a semi-doze with a start.

“Hullo! somebody wants Maggie!” exclaimed

Ralph Stetson, as he gazed out of the open window. He saw nothing more novel before his eyes, however, than the same monotonous stretch of yellow, sandy wastes, sprinkled with sage brush and dotted by a few wandering cattle, which the train had been traversing for hours.

"You'll have to get used to New Mexican pronunciation of Mexican names, Ralph," laughed his companion, as he also opened his eyes and began looking about him in the half-startled manner peculiar to those abruptly awakened from "forty winks." "'Maggie,' as you call it, is our station."

"Station!" echoed the other. "Where is it?"

He stuck his head out of the window as the train gradually decreased speed, but his eyes encountered nothing more suggestive of a town than a stock car on a lonely side track, into which some cowboys, with wild yells and much spurring of their wiry little steeds, were herding a few beef cattle.

"That freight car must be in front of the town," muttered the boy, pulling in his head.

"Over this side, you tenderfoot!" laughed

Jack Merrill, pointing out of the left-hand window. "Haven't you got used to Western towns yet?"

"One-sided towns, you mean, I guess," said Ralph, rising and looking out in the opposite direction. "Why in the name of the State of New Mexico do they build all the towns out here at one side of the tracks?"

"So that Easterners can have something to wonder about," laughed Jack Merrill, brushing off the accumulation of white desert dust from his dark suit with a big brown hand.

"Or so that they can at least get a few minutes of shade when a train pulls in," retorted Ralph, gazing at the sun-baked collection of wooden structures toward which the train was rolling. A yellow water tank, perched on a steel frame, towered above the town like a sunflower on a stalk. Apparently it took the place of trees, of which there was not a vestige, unless a few cactus plants be excepted.

"Better follow my example and brush some of the desert off," said Jack, still brushing vigorously.

"No, let the porter do it; here he is," said the Eastern Ralph. Sure enough, with his black face expanded in a grin expectant of tips, the presiding genius of the Pullman approached.

"Come on, cheer up, Ralph!" laughed Jack, glancing at his companion's dismal face, which was turned toward the window and its barren view. "Don't be downcast because my home town isn't surrounded by elms, and meadows, and fat Jersey cows, and all that. Haven't we lain awake many a night at Stonefell College, talking over the West, and here you are in the heart of it."

"Well, it's a good warm heart, anyway!" grumbled Ralph, mopping his steaming forehead.

The train came to a stop with an abrupt jerk, and followed by the porter, carrying two new and shiny suitcases, the boys hastened from the car, into the blinding sunlight which lay blisteringly on Maguez and its surroundings. Everything quivered in the heat. The boys were the only passengers to alight.

"Phew, it's like opening an oven door!" exclaimed Ralph, as the heated atmosphere fell full

upon him. "We've come more than two thousand miles from an Eastern summer to roast out here."

"And look at the train, will you!" cried Jack. "It looks as if it had been through a snowstorm."

He pointed down the long line of coaches, each of which was powdered thickly with white dust.

"All ab-oa-rd!"

The conductor's sonorous voice echoed down the train, and with a few mighty puffs from the laboring engine, the wheels once more began to revolve. The porter, clutching a tip in his fingers, leaped back on to his car. All the time they had been waiting in the station the locomotive had been impatiently blowing off steam, and emitting great clouds of black smoke, as though in a desperate hurry to get away from inhospitable-looking Maguez. It now lost no time in getting into motion. As the cars began to roll by, Jack gave a sudden shout.

"Ralph! The-the professor! We've forgotten him!"

"Good gracious, yes! What could we have been thinking of! We are getting as absent-

mind as he is. Here, stop the train! Hey, I say, we——”

But before the shouts had done resounding, a tall, spare man of middle age stepped out on the platform of one of the front coaches, and after gazing about him abstractedly for a few seconds, swung himself off, landing unsteadily on a pair of long, slender legs. So great was the shock of the professor's landing that his huge spectacles were jerked off his prominent nose, and he had all he could do to retain a hold on a large volume which he held tightly clasped under his left arm.

The boys hurried to pick up the professor's spectacles and hand them to him.

“We almost lost you, professor!” exclaimed Ralph.

“Ah, boys, I was immersed in the classics—‘The Defense of Socrates,’ and——”

“Why, Professor Wintergreen, where is your suitcase?” exclaimed Jack suddenly. “See—the train is moving, and——”

“Shades of Grecian Plato!” shouted the pro-

fessor, glancing about him wildly. "I've forgotten it! Stop! I must get it back! I——"

He made a sudden dash for the train, which was now moving so swiftly that it was manifestly impossible that he could board it in safety. The boys both pulled him back, despite his struggles.

Just then, the car which the boys had recently vacated began to glide by. A black face appeared at the window. It was the porter, and in his hand he held a large green suitcase. It was the same the professor had left behind him when he vacated the car in which they had traveled from the East, and went forward into the smoking car with his book.

"Look out!" yelled the porter, as he threw the piece of baggage out of the window. It hurtled forth with a vehemence indeed that threatened to take off the scientist's head, which it narrowly missed.

"Fo' de Lawd!" the porter shouted back, as the train gathered way. "Wha' yo all got in dat valise—bricks?"

"No, indeed, sir," retorted the professor seri-

ously, as his suitcase went bounding over the platform, which was formed of sun-baked earth. "I have books. The idea of such a question. Why should I want to carry bricks about with me, although the ancient Egyptians——"

By this time the porter was far out of hearing, and the last car of the train had whizzed by. Before the professor could conclude his speech, the suitcase—as if to prove his contention as to its contents by actual proof—burst open, and out rolled several massive volumes. The few loungers, who had gathered to watch the train come in, set up a roar of laughter as the professor—his coat flaps flying out behind him like the tail of some strange bird—darted after his beloved volumes.

"That's what you might call a circulating library!" grinned Jack, as the books bounded about with the impetus of their fall.

"I thought it was a Carnegie. Car, you see——" began Ralph, when a sudden shout checked him. He glanced up in the direction from which it had come. A dust-covered buckboard, in which sat a tall, bronzed man in plainsman's clothes, was

dashing toward them. The two buckskin ponies which drew it were being urged to their utmost speed by the driver, to whom Jack Merrill was already waving his hand and shouting:

“Hello, dad!”

In the meantime the professor was groping about on the platform, picking up his scattered treasures, and all the time commenting loudly to himself on his misfortune.

“Dear, dear!” he exclaimed, picking up one bulky volume and examining it with solicitude. “Here’s a corner broken off Professor Willikin Williboice’s ‘The Desert Dwellers of New Mexico, With Some Account of the Horn Toad Eaters of the Region.’ And what have we here? Eheu! the monumental work of Professor Simeon Sandburr, on the ‘Fur-Bearing Pollywog of the South Polar Regions,’ is——”

“Slightly damaged about the back!” broke in a hearty voice behind him. “But never mind, professor; the pollywogs will grow up into frogs yet, never fear. We’ll soon have those volumes mended; and now let me introduce myself, as my son Jack seems unable to do so. My name is

Jefferson Merrill, the owner of Agua Caliente Ranch."

"Delighted to meet you, sir," said the professor. "Proud to encounter a man whose name is not unknown to science in connection with his efforts to uncover something of the history of the mesa dwellers of this part of the world."

"Whose relics, if my son informed me rightly in his letters from school in the East, you have come to study, professor."

"Yes, sir; thanks to your hospitality," rejoined the professor, imprisoning his recovered volumes with a click of his suitcase clasps; "it was extremely handsome of you to invite me, and——"

"Not at all, my dear sir, not at all," expostulated the rancher, a kindly smile spreading on his bronzed features. "Besides," he continued in his breezy manner, "as Latin professor at Stonefell College you will no doubt be able to give an eye to your two pupils, and keep them out of mischief better than I could." Here the professor looked doubtful. "You see, we're pretty busy now, what with cattle rustlers and——"

"Cattle rustlers, dad!" exclaimed Jack.
"Hooray!"

"It's nothing to be enthusiastic over, my boy. Several of the border ranchers have suffered severely recently from their depredations."

"Have you lost any stock, dad?"

"No; so far, I have luckily escaped. But the rascals may come at any time, and it keeps me on the lookout. They are well organized, I believe, and have a stronghold somewhere back across the border. So you boys will have to depend on your own devices for amusement. But now come, don't let's stand baking here any longer. There's a long drive before us, and we had better be getting on."

"But, dad, look at all our baggage!" cried Jack, pointing to the heap of trunks the baggage car had dropped. "There'll never be room for all of us in that buckboard."

"So I guessed," smiled his father. "So I had Bud Wilson bring in two ponies for you boys to ride out on. You told me, I think, that your friend Ralph, here, could ride."

"Good for you, dad!" exclaimed Jack impul-

sively; "it'll be fine to get in the saddle again—and to see old Bud, too," he added.

"Who is Bud?" asked Ralph.

"You'll soon get to know him yourself," laughed Mr. Merrill. "But you boys go and get your horses. While you are gone the professor and I will try to get some of these independent gentlemen standing about to give us a hand to load the trunks on. Then we'll drive on to the ranch. You can overtake us. Eh, Professor Summerblue?"

"Wintergreen, sir," rejoined the professor in a dignified way.

"Eh—oh, I beg your pardon. I knew it was something to do with the seasons. I hope you will pardon me, Professor Spring—— No, I mean Wintergreen."

"Just like dad, he never can remember a name," laughed Jack, as the two boys hastened off to find the ponies and Bud.

"Maybe he is worried about these cattle bus-tlers——"

"Rustlers, you tenderfoot—you are as bad as dad."

"Well, rustlers, then. They must be desperate characters."

"A lot of sneaking greasers usually. They hustle the cattle or horses off over the border, but occasionally one of them gets caught and strung up, and that's the end of it."

"Then there are no border wars any more, or Indians, or——"

"Adventures left in the West," Jack finished for him, laughing at the other's disappointed tone. Then, more seriously: "Well, Ralph, the West isn't what it's pictured to be in Wild West shows; but we've plenty of excitement here once in a while, and before you go back East, with those lungs of yours in A-one shape, you may experience some of it."

"I hope so," said Ralph, looking up the long dusty street with its sun-blistered board shacks on either side, with a few disconsolate ponies tied in front. The yellow water tower topped above it all like some sort of a misshapen palm tree or sunflower on steel legs. In fact, a more typical border town than Maguez at noon on a June day could not be imagined. Except for the buzzing

of flies, and the occasional clatter of a horse's hoofs as some one rode or drove up to the general store—which, together with a blacksmith shop, a disconsolate-looking hotel, and a few miscellaneous buildings made up the town—there was not a sound to disturb the deep, brooding silence of the desert at noonday. Far on the horizon, like great blue clouds, lay the *Sierre de la Hacheta*, in the foothills of which lay *Agua Caliente Ranch*.

"So this is the desert?" went on Ralph, as they made their way up the rough wooden sidewalk toward the stable where they expected to find Bud Wilson and the horses.

"This is it," echoed Jack Merrill, "and the longer you know it the better you like it."

"It's peaceful as a graveyard, anyhow," commented Ralph. "Doesn't anything ever happen? I wonder if——"

He broke off suddenly as a startling interruption occurred.

The quiet of Maguez had been rudely shattered by a sudden sound.

Bang!

From a small building to their right, on which was painted in scrawly red letters the words, "Riztorant. Meelz a' t Awl Howrz," there had come the sharp crack of a pistol shot.

Before its echoes had died away, several doors opened along the street, and a motley crowd of cowboys, Mexicans and blanketed Indians poured out to ascertain the cause of the excitement.

They had not long to wait. From the door of the restaurant a pig-tailed Mongolian suddenly shot with the speed of a flying jackrabbit. The Chinaman cleared the hitching rail in front of the place at one bound, his progress being hastened from behind by a perfect avalanche of cups and other dishes.

Bang!

A second shot came, as the Oriental sprinted up the street. All at once he stopped dead in his tracks as the bullet sang by his ear.

"Well, Ralph, I guess something's happened, after all!" remarked Jack Merrill, as the crowd began to thicken and the restaurant door once more opened. This time a strange figure, to Ralph's Eastern eyes, emerged from the portal.

A sinister suggestion was lent to the newcomer's appearance by the fact that in his right hand there glistened an exceedingly business-like looking revolver.

CHAPTER II.

THE BOYS FIND TROUBLE.

"No shootee! No shootee!"

The blue-overalled Chinaman plumped down on his knees in the thick dust, with his hands clasped in entreaty. Above him, threatening the cowering wretch with his pistol, stood the figure of the man who had emerged so suddenly from the restaurant door. The crowd doing nothing stood stoically looking on.

The tormentor of the Mongolian was a tall, swarthy figure of a man, crowned with a high-peaked, silver-braided sombrero, the huge brim of which almost obscured the repulsive details of his swarthy face. The remainder of his garb was a short jacket, beneath which a broad red sash upheld the most peculiar nether garments Ralph had ever seen. They were tight about their wearer's thin legs as far as the knees, when the

black velvet of which they were made suddenly became as full and baggy as the trousers of a sailor. High-heeled boots and a pair of jingling silver spurs completed his fantastic costume—the typical holiday garb of a Mexican, including the revolver.

“By Sam Hooker, I know that chink!” cried Jack, as the boys ran up and joined the crowd. “It’s Hop Lee. He used to cook on my father’s ranch. I remember hearing now that he had started some kind of a restaurant in town. Here, Hop Lee, what’s the matter?”

“Oh, Misser Mellill, you helpee me! No let Misser De Ballios shootee me! I do no halm. Me catch um——”

“What are you boys interfering here for?” demanded the Mexican suddenly, wheeling angrily. He spoke in good English, but with a trace of accent. Jack, despite his brown face and the keen, resourceful look which comes from a plainsman’s life, wore Eastern-cut clothes. The Mexican had promptly sized him up for a tender-foot. “You just run along, or you’ll get hurt,” he continued menacingly.

He leveled his gun, and brusquely ordered the Chinaman, who had by this time arisen, to kneel once more in the dust.

"Don't do it, Hop Lee. Get back to your cook stove," cried Jack.

"He *will* kneel!" declared the Mexican, facing about, "or——"

"Well, or what?" demanded Jack, looking the silver-braided bravado straight in the eyes.

"Or you will!"

Question and answer came sharp as pistol shots.

The Mexican raised his pistol menacingly. But at the same instant a foot suddenly projected between the Spanish-American's slender legs and twisted about one limb. The next instant the gaudily garbed bully lay prostrate in the dust, the pungent stuff filling his eyes, mouth and nose.

It was Ralph Stetson's foot which had tripped the man. The boy had acted in a sudden excess of fear that the Mexican was about to shoot his chum. As a matter of fact, the fellow had had no such intention. But now he had shared the

fate of many another man who has made a bluff, only to have it promptly taken at its full value.

A sort of murmur of alarm went through the crowd as the Mexican measured his length in the dust.

"Say, pard," said a short, chunky little cowboy behind Ralph, "you've done it now; that's Black Ramon De Barrios."

"Well, he's white now!" laughed the boy, as the Mexican rose to his feet with his features smothered with white dust.

"Looks as if he'd been taking a dive in the flour barrel!" laughed Jack. He turned to Ralph with a quick, "Thanks, old fellow. I see that you're as much on the job here as on the football field. But I don't think he meant to shoot——"

"No, he *did* not, but he *does* now!"

De Barrios approached the boys, his pistol leveled and his black, serpent-like eyes glinting wickedly. "I'll show you what Black Ramon can do! He never forgets an insult nor forgives an injury!"

Aghast at the threatened tragedy, the crowd did nothing, and the boys stood rooted to one

spot. Closer and closer, like a snake, the Mexican crept, determined, it seemed, to get the full measure of anticipation out of his revenge for his tumble. Jack never flinched, but his heart beat unpleasantly fast.

The Mexican's brown, cigarette-stained forefinger trembled on the trigger. He was quite close now.

The fat little cowboy gave a yell of alarm, and sprang suddenly forward.

"Look out! The varmint's going to shoot!"

But at the same instant a strange thing happened. A snaky loop whizzed through the air and settled about the bully's neck. The vengeful Mexican was suddenly jerked off his feet as it tightened, his long legs threshing the air like those of a swimming frog.

"Roped, by ginger!" yelled some one in the crowd, as De Barrios, at the end of a lariat, went ploughing through the dust on his face for the second time.

And roped, Ramon De Barrios was. So absorbed had the crowd been in watching the tense scene before them that few of them had noticed

a cowboy mounted on a small calico pony who had ridden slowly up from a point behind the boys. This cow-puncher, a long-legged, rangy, sun-burned fellow, in typical stockman's garb, had watched everything attentively till the critical moment. Then, with a quick twist, he had roped the Mexican as neatly as he would have tied a calf on branding day.

"Well done, and thank you, Bud!" shouted Jack, running up and shaking the cowboy's hand.

The latter had halted his pony a short distance from them. But the distance had been quite far enough for De Barrios, whose method of traveling had been far from comfortable.

"Where did you spring from, old fellow?" Jack went on.

"From the corral up the street," said Bud, displaying no more emotion than if he and the boys had had an appointment to meet at that spot under quite ordinary circumstances. "Just wait till I get this here sidewinder of a greaser cut loose, and I'll talk to you."

All this time De Barrios had lain prone in the dust, with the rope stretched tight, just as the

trained cow pony had kept it. Bud now cast loose the end which he had wound about his saddle horn, and the Mexican, with a sulky look, rose to his feet and threw off the rawhide loop.

"Here's your gun," said Bud Wilson, leaning from his saddle and picking up the fallen weapon from the dust.

"Hold on, though," he said suddenly. Breaking the weapon open, he "sprung" the shells out of it. This done, he handed it to the Mexican, who took it with a sinister look.

"To our next meeting!" he grated, as he turned away.

"Well, stay on your feet next time!" rejoined Bud composedly, amid a roar from the crowd.

"Now, Hop Lee," demanded Jack Merrill of the Chinaman, as De Barrios strode off without a word, but with a black look on his swarthy face, "what was the trouble in there?"

"Why, the Chink spilled a spot of grease on the brim of the Mexican's sombrero," volunteered somebody, "and when he wouldn't wipe it off again, De Barrios got mad."

"Well, I don't know as I blame the greaser so

very much, those being the circumstances," remarked Bud dryly. "These Chinks has got to be kep' in order some way. Now get back to your chuck wagon, Hop, and don't give no more dissatisfaction to your customers."

Ralph now learned who Bud Wilson was—a cow-puncher who had worked for Jack's father for many years, and had practically brought Jack up on the range. Bud had two strong dislikes, Mexicans and Apaches, and his services against the latter had given him his nickname of Apache Bud. For tenderfeet, Bud had merely pity.

"Poor critters," he would say, when at his ease in the bunkhouse, or when sweeping across the range on his favorite calico pony, "I s'pose it ain't their fault—being raised unnatural—but the most of 'em is dumb as a locoed coyote."

"What ponies have you brought for us, Bud?" asked Jack, as, with the two boys walking beside him, the cowboy rode slowly back to the stable, from the door of which he had first espied their difficulty.

"Waal, I brought Firewater fer you," said

Bud, "and Petticoats, the buckskin, for your tenderfoot friend here."

"Petticoats!" said Jack in a tone of vexation. "Why, Petticoats is the tamest old plug on the ranch."

"That's all right, Jack," said Ralph, bravely choking back a feeling of mortification. "I guess, when I've shown I can ride, I'll get a chance at a better animal."

Bud Wilson gazed at him with a kindlier expression than he had yet bestowed on the rather pale-faced young Easterner. Although an athlete and a boxer, Ralph had had some slight bronchial trouble of late, and had been recommended to spend his vacation in New Mexico as a means of effecting a complete cure.

"So you kin ride?" Bud asked.

"A little," said Ralph modestly.

As a matter of fact, Mr. Stetson, the railroad magnate, owned several good horses, and had always encouraged his son Ralph in using them. In this way Ralph had had plenty of experience with one or two of the Eastern "drag hunts," and had played polo a little. Jack Merrill knew this.

It mortified him, therefore, to think that old Petticoats had been brought for his guest.

"I tell you, Ralph," he said generously, "you take Firewater and see how you like him."

"Not much, Jack," exclaimed Ralph. "He's your own pet particular pony. I've often heard you speak of him. No; I'll take old Petticoats. I guess we'll get on all right together."

Both ponies were saddled and ready for them when the party reached the stable. De Barrios, who had had his heavy black horse in the corral, was riding out as they came up. The Mexican gave them a black look, to which they paid no attention. The Mexican, whatever he may have looked like on foot, presented an impressive sight on his black horse—a superb, long-tailed animal with a glossy coat and great, restless eyes. De Barrios's saddle and bridle and martingale were covered with silver, and both horse and rider were typical productions of the border.

"Even you will admit that that's a good horse," said Jack to Bud, as the Mexican loped off at an easy, swinging gait, and the boys started into the barn.

"Oh, yes. He's all right; but give me my calico here for a traveler," said Bud, patting the neck of his beloved Chappo.

Poor Petticoats was certainly not an imposing-looking pony. She was a small buckskin, and appeared to be a good enough traveler; but she had an ewe neck, and a straggly tail, and a lack-lustre eye, very unlike Jack's glossy-coated, bright bay pony.

"I thought you said she was a quiet old plug," said Ralph, as his eyes fell on the mare for the first time.

"So she is, why?" asked Jack, who had been too busy tightening Firewater's cinch to notice the really remarkable antics of Petticoat.

"Well, look at that!" exclaimed Ralph, as Petticoats lashed out at him.

For a quiet steed, Petticoats certainly was jumping about a good deal. There was a restless look in her eyes. She rolled them back till only the white showed. Her ears were pressed wickedly close to the side of her not very shapely head.

"Say, she's acting queerly, for fact," said

Jack. "Maybe she's been eating loco weed. Shall I ask Bud to look her over before you mount?"

"No, don't. He'd only josh me about her. I guess she's only restless. Just come off pasture, maybe."

So without a word to Bud, who had remained outside the barn while the boys were getting their ponies, Ralph swung himself easily into the saddle.

His body had hardly touched the leather before the placid—or, rather, supposedly placid—Petticoats leaped into the air with a spring which would have unseated a less-experienced rider, and then came down with all four feet stiffly braced together in a wicked buck.

If Ralph had been a less plucky rider, he would have been unseated, and almost to a certainty seriously hurt. As it was, however, he stuck to the saddle.

"Whoa, Petticoats, whoa!" shouted Jack, steadying his own pony, which was getting excited and prancing about as it saw the other's antics.

"W-w-w-what's the m-m-matter with her?"

The words were jerked out of Ralph's mouth, as Petticoats plunged and reared and gave a succession of stiff-legged bucks.

Jack had no time to reply before the buckskin, with a squeal and a series of running leaps, was out of the stable door.

"What in the name of the great horn spoon!" yelled the startled Bud, as a buff-colored streak flashed past him. The next instant, with a rattle of hoofs and an alarming crackling and flapping of saddle leathers, the little pony was off in a cloud of dust, headed for the desert.

"Locoed?" shouted Jack, as he and Bud Wilson dug their big, blunt-rowelled spurs into their mounts and started in pursuit.

"I dunno," muttered Bud, shaking a big loop out of his "rope," as they tore along at break-neck speed, "but we've got to catch him."

"Why? If he doesn't fall off he'll be all right. She'll soon run herself out."

"No, she won't, either. Since you've been East they've put through a big irrigation canal out yonder. That cayuse is headed right for it, and

if the kid can't stop her, they'll go sky-whooping over the edge."

"Wow! We've got to get him."

"That's what. Spur up now, and get your rope ready. Now's your chance to show me you haven't forgot all I ever taught you about roping."

Jack unslung the thirty feet of plaited raw-hide from the right hand of his saddle horn, and shook out a similar loop to Bud's. Both ponies were now going at the limit of their speed, and the distance between them and the runaway seemed to be diminishing.

"Will we get him in time?" gasped Jack.

"Dunno. There's the canal yonder. It's a twenty-foot drop."

The cowboy pointed dead ahead to where a dark, purplish streak cut across the dun expanse of desert.

"We've *got* to beat him to it!" said Jack, gritting his teeth.

CHAPTER III.

A RACE FOR LIFE.

Fast as they raced on, Jack and the cow-puncher seemed to gain on the flying Petticoats with aggravating slowness.

"Consarn that mare, she's plumb locoed, I reckon!" growled Bud, as they rocketed along, flogging their ponies to renewed efforts with their heavy quirts.

"She runs like a quarter horse!" gasped Jack, his mouth full of alkali dust; for he had no neck handkerchief to pull up over his mouth, vaquero style.

But with their splendid mounts they were bound to gain on the suddenly crazed Petticoats, and gradually they drew so close that all three riders were blanketed by the same cloud of dust.

Behind them came a second great cloud, in which rode a score or more of riders from

Maguer who had hastily mounted and galloped out to see the fun as soon as they heard there was a runaway.

"The canal!" shouted Jack suddenly.

A wandering breeze for a second swept aside the dust cloud before them, and showed the fresh, raw wound gaping in the level surface of the desert. It was fully thirty feet wide, and as the canal was a new ditch, its sides were almost as steep as a wall.

Bud Wilson said nothing, but set his lips grimly. With an imperceptible movement of his wrist, he gathered his trailing loop into the air and began to whirl it above his head, first slowly and then faster and faster. The rawhide loop opened out till it was ten feet or more in circumference.

"Now!" he yelled, and at the same instant the released loop went swirling through the air.

"Yip-yip!" yelled Jack.

Bud had won proudly many a prize for roping, and was the most expert man with the lariat in his part of the West. Had he wished, he could have roped the flying Petticoats by the heels. But to have done so would have been to have brought

the crazed pony down with a crash, and probably have seriously injured, if not killed, her rider.

Swish!

The great loop settled as accurately as if hands had guided it about the maddened pony's neck. Bud took a twist of his end round the saddle horn and checked the calico.

"Got her!" screamed Jack. "Yi-hi!"

But there came a sudden shout of dismay from Bud.

The calico's foot had caught in a gopher hole, and over he went, turning almost a complete somersault.

Jack gave a shout of horror as he saw the catastrophe. He feared Bud had been killed, but the lithe bronco buster was up in a second, stumbling toward his fallen horse.

But the rope did not prove equal to the sudden strain put upon it by the collapse of the calico. The instant the pony had fallen, of course its full weight had come on the rawhide, instead of there being, as Bud had planned, a gradual strangling down of the runaway. It had been,

in effect, a tug of war between the flying Petticoats and the suddenly checked calico.

Crack!

The rope twanged taut as a stretched fiddle string and parted with a snap just as Bud reached back into the hip of his leathern chaperaros for his Colt.

He had determined to shoot the runaway and risk disabling Ralph, rather than have the pony take the twenty-foot plunge over the brim of the canal. But at the moment his finger pressed the trigger there came a shout from Jack, who was now only a few paces behind Petticoats. The boy's hastily thrown lariat had missed altogether.

Before their horrified eyes, the runaway buckskin and her rider the next instant plunged in one confused heap over the bank of the canal and vanished from sight.

Jack was within a breath of following them over the brink, but in the nick of time he wheeled the carefully trained Firewater round on his haunches and averted a second calamity.

Controlling his half-maddened steed, the boy pressed to the edge of the canal. The bank was

new and smooth, and as steep as the roof of a house. Ralph and his pony had rolled over and over down this place in one inextricable heap. But by the time Jack reached the edge of the steep bank, Ralph had kicked free of the big, clumsy Mexican stirrups and was struggling in the water.

The flood was rushing along in a yellow, turbid swirl. There had been a freshet in the mountains a few days before, and to relieve the pressure on the land company's dam up there, the spillways had been opened to their capacity. The canal was carrying the great overflow. It tore along between the high, steep banks like a mill race.

"The flood gates!" came a frenzied shout from Bud. He pointed westward.

In a flash Jack realized that the flood gates below must be open, and at the instant of this realization came another thought.

If he did not act and act quickly, Ralph would be carried through the gates to probably certain death.

"Ralph! Ralph!" he shouted, as he gazed down

at the brave struggle his chum was making to reach the bank; but the current swept the Eastern boy away from it every time. His pony had gained the bank, and was pawing pitifully at the steep, sandy slope.

It did not need more than a glance to see that Ralph's strength was giving out. He turned up a white, despairing face to Jack, by whose side there now stood Bud Wilson.

"Quick, Jack! Chuck him the rope!" shouted Bud in a tense voice.

Inwardly angry at himself for not having thought of this before, Jack sent his rawhide snaking down the bank. Ralph, his face white and strained above the tearing yellow current, reached out in a desperate effort to clutch the rawhide. Even as his fingers gripped it, however, the current proved too much for him. He was swept away on its white-flecked surface like a bit of drift.

"Ride, boy, ride! We've got to beat him to the sluice and close the gates! It's his only chance!"

It was Bud's voice once more.

Somehow, Jack found himself in the saddle, with Firewater racing under him as that brave little bay had never raced before. Close alongside came Bud, rowelling his bleeding-kneed calico cruelly to keep alongside. Far behind came shouts and yells from the crowd. The buckskin, the cause of all the trouble, managed to clamber to the edge of the stream, where the water was slightly shallower, and was dragged out by ropes. While the race for life swept onward, she stood dripping and shivering on the summit of the bank.

From his flying pony Jack caught occasional glimpses of Ralph in the stream below. The boy was a good swimmer, and now that he was being carried along with the current, instead of fighting it, he was able to keep his head above water most of the time.

"Stick it out, Ralph, old boy!" yelled Jack, as he dashed past the half-drowned lad whom the rapid current was carrying almost as swiftly as the over-run ponies could gallop.

"We'll be in time!" exclaimed Jack, through his clinched teeth. Right ahead of him he saw

some grim, gallows-like looking timbers reared up against the sky line, which he knew must mark the sluice.

Hardly had the thought flashed through his mind, when Firewater seemed to glide from beneath him. An instant later Jack found himself rolling over and over on the level plain.

The same accident as had befallen Bud had happened to him. A gopher hole—one of those pests of desert riders—had tripped Firewater and sent his rider sprawling headlong.

“Hurt?”

Bud Wilson, on the calico, drew up alongside Jack, who had struggled to his feet and was looking about in a dazed sort of way.

“No, I’ll be all right in a second. But Firewater!”

The bay had risen to his feet, but stood, sweating and trembling, with his head down almost between his knees. He could not have expressed “dead beat” better if he had said it in so many words.

“Blown up!” exclaimed Bud disgustedly.

“What shall we do?” choked out Jack.

"Here, quick! Up behind me!"

Bud reached down a hand, kicked a foot out of his left stirrup, and in a second Jack was swung up behind him and they were off.

"I hope to goodness we strike no more gopher holes," thought the boy, as they raced along, scarcely more slowly than when the plucky little calico had only a single burden to carry. Never had the brave little beast been used more unmercifully. Bud Wilson plied his heavy quirt on the pony's flanks as if he meant to lay the flesh open. To every lash of the rawhide the calico responded bravely, leaping forward convulsively.

"We'll beat him to it!" cried Jack triumphantly, as both riders fairly fell off the spent calico's back at the sluice gates.

"Yep, maybe; but we've got to get 'em closed first!" was Bud's laconic response.

Paying no further attention to the calico—which was too spent, anyhow, to attempt to get away—the two, the man and the boy, ran at top speed across the narrow wooden runway which led to the big wheels by which the gateways of the sluice were raised and lowered.

"If Ralph can only hold out!" gasped Jack, who, far up the stream had espied a small black object coming rapidly toward him, which he knew must be the head of his chum. Ralph was swimming easily, taking care not to wind himself, and looking out for any opportunity which might present itself to reach the bank. No sooner did he attempt to cross the current, however, than the water broke over him as if he had been a broached-to canoe. He confined his efforts, therefore, to keeping his head above water. Of the deadly peril that lay ahead of him he had, of course, no knowledge.

"Hurry, Bud!" cried Jack, in an agony of fear that they would be too late.

"All right now, take it easy, Jack. No use hurrying over this job," replied Bud easily, though his drawn face and the sweat on his forehead showed the agitation under which he was laboring.

"Consarn this thing! How's it work!" he muttered angrily, fiddling with the machinery, which was complicated and fitted with elaborate gears

and levers to enable the terrific pressure of the water to be handled more easily.

Beneath their feet the stream—a mad torrent above—developed into a screaming, furious flood at the sluiceway. It shot through the narrow confines at tremendous velocity, shaking and tearing at the masonry buttresses as if it would rip them away.

To Jack's excited imagination, it seemed as if the swollen canal was instinct with life and malevolence, and determined to have human life or property in revenge for its confinement.

Suddenly the boy's eyes fell on something he had not noticed before. Beyond the floodgate the engineers of the irrigation canal, finding that the confinement of the water at the sluiceway tended to make the current too savage for mere sandy walls to hold it, had constructed a tunnel. This expedient had been resorted to only after numerous experimental cement retaining walls had been swept away.

Just beyond the buttresses on the other side of the sluice, the entrance of the tunnel yawned

blackly. Like a great mouth it swallowed the raging flood as it swept through the sluice.

"Bud! Bud! Look!" cried Jack, pointing.

"Great jumping side-winders! I forgot the tunnel!" groaned Bud, his usually emotionless face working in his agitation. He had been handling the sluice desperately, but without result.

"We *must* close the gates within a second, or it will be too late!" shouted Jack, above the roar of the water. Ralph's despairing face was very close now.

"My poor kid, we can't!" wailed Bud.

"Why not?"

"The double-doggoned, dash beblinkered fool as looks after 'em has padlocked 'em, and we can't git 'em closed without a key!"

There was not a second to think.

Even as the discovery that it would be impossible to close the gates was made, Ralph's white face flashed into view almost beneath them.

Bud made a quick snatch at Jack's lariat, which the boy still retained, and snaked it down over the racing water.

"Missed!" he groaned, as Ralph's upturned face was hurried by.

At the same instant there came a splash that the cow puncher heard even above the roar of the water as it tore through its confines.

Bud glanced quickly round.

Where Jack Merrill had stood a moment before were a pair of shoes, the boy's coat and his shirt.

But Jack had gone—he had jumped to Ralph's rescue. As Bud, with a sharp exclamation of dismay, switched sharply round, he was just in time to see the forms of the two boys swallowed in the darkness of the irrigation tunnel.

CHAPTER IV.

THROUGH THE GREAT DARKNESS.

Little given to emotion as he was, Bud Wilson reeled backward as if about to fall, and gripped the woodwork of the sluice till the blood came beneath his nails. His eyes were still riveted on the yawning black mouth of the tunnel, and the white-flecked, yellow water racing into it, when the followers of the chase for life came galloping up, leading the ponies of the two boys who had vanished. Blank looks were exchanged as they learned what had happened.

"Not a chance for them." was the concensus of opinion.

Jack Merrill was not a boy who does things without due thought, however. When he had jumped into what seemed certain death he had done so with a definite plan in his head.

In moments of intense mental strain the mind

sometimes acts with lightning-like rapidity, and Jack had reasoned like a flash that the irrigation tunnel, being built to convey water to the lands of the Maguez Land and Development Company, probably emerged on their lands, which lay not more than a mile away. Of course, he was not certain of this, but the life of his friend was at stake.

Spent as his chum was, Jack thought Ralph could hardly last throughout the passage of the tunnel, while he, Jack, was fresh, and also a stronger swimmer. These thoughts had all raced through his mind while he kicked off his boots and tugged his shirt over his head.

Then had come the swift flash below him of Ralph's white, imploring face—and the leap.

For a second the current, as he struck it, seemed to be tearing Jack limb from limb. The undertow at the sluice caught him and dragged him down, down, and held him under the turbid water till it seemed that his head must burst open. At last, however, he was shot to the surface like a cork out of a bottle. Joyously he filled his lungs and began swimming.

As his hands struck out they encountered something.

To his intense joy, the next instant Jack found that the current had thrown its two victims, himself and Ralph Stetson, together, and none too soon.

Ralph's eyes were closed, and though he still floated, he seemed incapable of further effort.

Hardly had Jack time to note this, when the light was suddenly blotted out, as if a great curtain had been drawn across the sun. There was a mighty roaring, like that of a thousand huge cataracts in his ears, and he knew that they had entered the water tunnel.

Where would it lead them?

Fortunately, to Jack, fresh as he was, it was not hard to support Ralph, who was almost exhausted, and keep his own head above water at the same time. All that the Western boy now feared was that he would give out before they reached the mouth of the tunnel, or a still more alarming possibility which he hardly dared to dwell on.

What if the tunnel narrowed?

In that case they would be completely submerged, and if the water were enclosed in an iron tube for any great distance, they would inevitably be miserably drowned. The roaring in the tunnel was terrific, but at least it meant one thing, and that was that there was space for sound to reverberate.

On and on they shot, borne like straws on the surface of the mad torrent.

"Does this thing never end, or have they run it clear through to the Pacific?" Jack began to wonder.

It seemed to him they had been traveling for hours. In reality it was only a few minutes.

All at once the boy was hurled against the side of the tunnel, and his feet touched bottom. If it had not been for the velocity of the current, he could have stopped his mad course right there. But the smooth sides of the tube afforded no hand hold, and the rapidity of the stream precluded all idea of attempting to stem the torrent.

But this incident meant to Jack that what he had dreaded most was actually happening.

The subterranean watercourse was narrowing.

Hardly had the thought flashed through his mind before he felt himself sucked by what seemed an invisible arm below the surface. At the same instant Ralph was torn from his arms, and both boys, submerged in a narrow part of the tunnel, were drawn through the dark tube at the speed of an express train.

"The end!" was the thought that flashed through Jack's mind as he felt that his worst apprehension had come true.

But it was not the end, for an instant later he was shot out of the terrible restriction of the narrow irrigation tube into brilliant, blinding sunlight.

"Why, this is a sort of scenic railway!" was the whimsical idea that sped across the boy's mind as he gazed about him. The current had ceased dashing him about, and he was floating in a large pool from which ramifications of sluiceways led in every direction. It was the main retaining basin of the irrigation works. Weakened though he was, Jack found no difficulty in swimming

here, and, to his delight, not many feet from him Ralph was still struggling feebly for life. A few strokes brought the boy to his chum's side, and a few strokes more brought them both ashore.

They reached the shallow bank, and Jack laid Ralph down. As he did so, the other boy fainted in good earnest. As Jack bent over his chum he was startled to hear a voice above, and looking up, saw a man in irrigation boots, with a big shovel in his hand, gazing at them curiously.

"Say, are you real, or just what the ground grew?" demanded the stranger. "The advertisements of this land company say their land'll grow anything, but dear land of Goshen! I didn't know it grew boys. That's a crop I've no use for. I've four of my own, and——"

"We're real boys, have nothing to do with any land company, and don't want to, either, after our experience in their water tunnel; and if you can help me get my chum up on the bank and help me revive him, I'll be much obliged," rejoined Jack, all in one breath.

"Well, if you came through that tube, it hasn't

hurt your wind any," said the rancher admiringly, dropping his irrigation tool and clambering down the bank. Together he and Jack soon had Ralph stretched out on the warm sandy soil in a big peach orchard, and it was not long before the Eastern boy opened his eyes and looked about him. It was longer, though, before he recollected what had happened. When he did, he knew that it was Jack who must have held him above water at the most critical stage of their wild trip through the tube.

"Thank you, Jack," he said simply.

"Oh, pshaw!" said Jack, reddening. "Didn't you trip up that Mexican and save me getting a bullet through my head?"

At this moment a great shout caused them both to look up. Riding toward them among the trees were a hundred or more mounted men, who broke into cheers as they saw the boys. They were the men who had found Bud Wilson at the sluice gate, and who had at once insisted on his mounting and riding on to the end of the tube to ascertain if by some marvelous chance the boys had survived. When Jack and Ralph stood up—

for they had been sitting on the ground, relating to their interested host their adventures—the cheers broke out afresh.

Bud Wilson did not say much. He was not a man of words, but his face expressed what he felt when he exclaimed in a voice that trembled a little in spite of his efforts to keep it steady.

“Waal, I knowed you’d come out of it all right, Jack Merrill.”

“I wasn’t so sure of it myself, I can tell you!” laughed Jack.

“Say,” said Ralph, after the first outburst of questions and answers had subsided, and the boys had had to tell over and over again every detail of their perilous trip, “what I can’t understand is why you call that plug,” pointing to the now downcast Petticoats, who had been led along with the party, “why you call that animal ‘quiet.’ What do *wild* horses do out here, eat you alive or breathe fire?”

“There was a blamed good reason fer Petticoats’ ructions,” said Bud slowly; and while the eyes of all were fixed intently on him, he held up a red-stained spur.

"A Mexican tickler!" cried Jack.

"That's what, and some one placed it under Petticoats' saddle blanket before the boy mounted," rejoined Bud solemnly.

"Poor beast! No wonder she cut up didoes," said Ralph.

"I should say not. Look at this."

The cowboy lifted the hind flap of Petticoats' saddle, and raising the blankets, showed her back raw and bleeding from the cruel roweling she had received.

"But however did that spur get there?" gasped Ralph.

"Not hard to guess. Can't you imagine?" asked Jack Merrill.

"No, unless——"

"It was that greaser you knocked out," Jack finished for him.

"Consarn the heathenish rattlesnake!" exclaimed the livery stable keeper, who had been among those to follow the wild chase of the canal-carried boys. "I seen him monkeying around your ponies just before he rode out of the barn. If I ever get my hands on him——"

A low growl running through the crowd finished his threat for him. It would have fared badly with Black Ramon had he been there then. But he was far away, riding for the mountains, where he would be safe from the ranchmen's vengeance.

"Waal, we'll run acrost his tracks some day," growled Bud Wilson, "and when we do—— Waal, let's talk about the weather."

The boys said nothing, but their faces spoke volumes. By this time, such was the heat of the sun, Ralph's clothes had almost dried out, and he was assured that he would suffer no ill effects from his immersion. As Jack was also almost dry, the rancher, who, it turned out, was a friend of Mr. Merrill's, invited the Agua Caliente party in to have something to eat while their horses were rubbed down and fed. After more congratulations and expressions of wonderment, the horsemen from Maguez rode back to town, and when they had spread the story, the atmosphere of that part of the country would have proved very unhealthful for Black Ramon. Indeed, there was talk of fitting up an expedition to go

out and get him, but it was surmised that the Mexican had probably ridden over the border and taken sanctuary in one of his retreats.

"Speaking of irrigation, I'm afraid we are going to have serious trouble with the water some day," Mr. Hungerford, the rancher, remarked as they sat at their meal.

"You mean your orchards will be overflowed?" inquired Jack.

"Oh, no. I'm not afraid of that. That pool in which you landed from the tunnel is drained by a score of small ditches which ought to be capable of handling any overflow. No, the ranches I mean are the ones back under the hills—the cattle ranges. The dam back near Grizzly Pass is none too strong, I am told, and if at any time following a cloudburst the sluiceways should not be opened in time, the retaining wall might burst, and the whole country be swept by a disastrous flood. Damage to thousands of dollars' worth of property and the death of scores of men and cattle might also be a consequence."

"But surely the dam is well guarded?" asked Ralph.

"That's just the trouble," said Mr. Hungerford seriously. "At night, I understand, only one old man is on watch there, and if he should meet with an accident there would be no one to watch for the safety of the ranchers in the foothills."

"Yep, if she'd carry away, she sure would raise Cain!" agreed Bud Wilson.

"Engineers are figuring on some means of strengthening the retaining wall now, I understand," rejoined Mr. Hungerford. "I hope they will complete their work before any storm breaks."

Soon after, the subject was changed, and at the conclusion of their meal, after thanking their hospitable host, the little party set out for Agua Caliente."

"What does Agua Caliente mean, anyhow?" asked Ralph, as they rode out of Mr. Hungerford's place.

"Hot water," rejoined Bud; "and it looks to me as if we didn't have to go as far as the range to get in it."

"There are some hot springs on one part of the ranch," explained Jack.

As the sun grew low they were still in the saddle. The desert had now been passed and they were traversing foothills—rough, broken ground, covered with scrub oak and split and riven by dried water courses. Behind were the dark slopes of the Sierra de la Hacheta. They appeared black and menacing in the dying light.

"They look like regular robbers' roosts," said Ralph, regarding them as the horses picked their way over the rough road, which was scarcely better than a track.

"Robbers' roosts, I guess so," laughed Bud; "and there are some robber roosters among 'em, too," he went on. "Those mountains are on the border, and some place over beyond them is the most pestiferous band of cattle rustlers and horse thieves that ever bothered a nice, peaceable community. Why, before Sam Hickey shot Walter Dodge at——"

But the boys had broken into a roar of laughter at Bud Wilson's idea of a peaceable community.

Their merriment was brought to a sudden halt, however.

From the road ahead had come the sudden clatter of a horse's hoofs. The animal was evidently being urged ahead at full speed.

Bud's hand slipped swiftly back to his hip pocket. The boys realized by this almost automatic action that they were in a country where men are apt to shoot first and ask questions afterward.

Presently a little rise brought the galloper into view.

At the sight of the advancing party, he too slackened speed, and his hand made the same curiously suggestive movement as had Bud Wilson's.

"Howdy!" called Bud tentatively to the dark form outlined against the sombre background of brown, scrub-grown foothill and purple mountain.

"Howdy, Bud Wilson!" came back the hail. "I'll be switched if I didn't think it was Black Ramon and some of his gang, for a minute!"

"Why, hello, Walt Phelps!" hailed Bud cheerfully, as the other advanced. "I didn't know

but you was some sort of varmint. How be yer?"

"First class, 'Frisco to Portland, Oregon. Hello, Jack Merrill! Well, you're looking natural. Welcome to our city!"

The stranger spurred his horse nearer, and Ralph saw that he was a boy about their own age, on a big, raw-boned gray horse that seemed capable of great efforts. Fast as the other had been advancing, the gray's flanks hardly heaved.

"Ralph, this is Walt Phelps. He and I used to play ball together when we weren't off on the range some place," said Jack, turning in his saddle to make the introduction. "He's a neighbor of ours. Lives on the next ranch. What are you hurrying so for, Walt?"

The other shoved back his broad sombrero, and the evening light shone on a freckled, good-natured face and the reddest hair Ralph had ever seen.

"Guess you ain't heard the news?" he asked curiously.

"No, what?"

"Why, those cattle rustlers have broken out

again. Raided Perkin's last night and got away with fifty head."

"Phew!"

"And that's not all. They know who's at the head of the gang now."

"Who?"

"Why, that bullying greaser—what's his name? That Mexican who's been in trouble a dozen times——"

"Black Ramon De Barrios?"

"That's the rooster! We heard he had the nerve to show up in town, and I'm riding in to see if I can't pick up some fellows and head him off."

"I guess you're too late, Walt."

"How do you know? You only just got in to-day from the East. I met your father a while back, and he told me."

"I know, but we've had time to meet Black Ramon and put something on our side of the book against him."

"Say—tell me." The other's tone held amazement.

"Come on and ride back with us, and I'll tell

you as we go along. Black Ramon's on Mexican soil by this time or soon will be."

Their adventures were soon related, and by the time Jack's narrative was concluded, the lights and welcoming voices of Agua Caliente were before them.

CHAPTER V.

THE RUSTLERS AT WORK.

“Jack!”

“Um-um-um-huh!” from Jack Merrill, as he turned over in his cot.

“Listen! There it is again—— What is it?”

Ralph Stetson sat bolt upright in bed, listening with all his might to the strange and shivery sound which had awakened him. It was shortly after midnight, following the evening of the boys' arrival, and both were sleeping—or rather had been sleeping—in a room set aside for them in one wing of the low, straggly ranch house in the foothills of the Sierra de la Hacheta.

“Wow-wow-wow!” came the cry once more from somewhere among the dreary, moonlit hills outside.

“Oh, that!” said the ranch-raised boy, with a laugh. “That's coyotes!”

"Oh," rejoined Ralph wisely. "Coyotes, eh?" But he did not lie down again. Instead, he listened more intently than before. Presently came another howl from some distance off.

"They're conversational beasts, aren't they?" inquired Ralph.

"What do you mean?" sleepily muttered Jack.

"Why, some friend of the one I just heard is answering him. Hark!"

Jack Merrill became suddenly interested as he heard the second howl. His eyes grew round as he listened intently, and he, too, sat up in his bed.

"Say," he remarked, "that is funny. And hark! there's another one—off there to the south."

"What do you suppose they are up to?"

"I've no idea, but I tell you what—if you like, we'll take the rifle and sneak out and see. What do you say?"

"Um-well, it's a bit chilly to go coyote hunting, but I should like to get one. Professor Wintergreen said at supper last night that he would like

to have the hide of one of the beasts for his collection. Let's go!"

"All right. Just slip on a few clothes. The magazine of my rifle's full. Don't make a racket getting out of the house, though. I don't just know how dad would take it."

"But he'll hear the rifle if we shoot one."

"That's so; but it will be too late then."

Silently as cats, the two boys got out of bed and dressed, an operation which was performed by slipping on trousers, shirts and boots over their pajamas. Then, with their sombrero hats on, they were ready to creep outside. The moon had been up for an hour, and was shining down in a radiant flood, illuminating the heaving surface of the foothills as if they had been a silver sea.

"Which way will we go?" whispered Ralph, as they stole along in the dark shadow of the low timber house like two culprits.

"Over there. Down toward the corral. The chicken house is down there, and those four-footed thieves are fond of chicken *au naturel*."

Taking advantage of every bit of shadow that

offered, the two lads crept toward the corral, a big inclosure about half an acre in extent, in the center of which stood a fenced haystack. The horses of the ranch were generally turned loose in it to browse about at their will. Usually not more than enough for the use of the ranch-house family were kept there, the rest being driven in from the "remuda" as required.

"Say, it's silent, isn't it?" whispered Ralph, as they crawled along behind a big stack of wild-oat hay.

"Well, you didn't expect to find a roaring city in the heart of the foothills of the Hachetas, did you?" inquired Jack, with vast sarcasm. "Hush! Now I think I saw something!"

"Where?"

"Off there to the south. It was slipping along among the hills. There, there it is again!"

Ralph strained his eyes into the darkness, but could see nothing of the object Jack had indicated. It had gone as utterly as if it had not been there.

Suddenly the wild howls that had awakened Ralph broke out once more. This time they came

quite close at hand, and neither boy could repress a start at the sound. It gave an impression of an outburst of demoniac mirth.

“Wow! ow-ow-ow-ow-ow!”

The cry was immediately echoed from the direction in which Jack had declared he had seen a gray shadow flitting in and out. The next instant both boys gave an involuntary shout of surprise, which they hastily checked, realizing that they were face to face with a stern necessity for silence.

Outlined as clearly against the moonlight as if it had been cut from black paper, the *figure of a horseman* had momentarily appeared, and then as abruptly vanished.

At the same instant there came a wild disturbance of hoofs in the corral, and before the boys' astonished eyes four more horsemen dashed from it and swept off toward the south. Behind them there trailed half a dozen of the animals which had been feeding or sleeping in the corral. To the neck of each was attached a lariat, and they followed their captors at breakneck speed.

“Horse thieves!” shouted Jack, springing to

his feet and giving the alarm by firing a volley of bullets after the retreating rustlers.

Instantly the sleeping ranch galvanized into active life. Lights flashed here and there, and from the bunkhouse on a hillside below the main house there poured a strangely assorted score of hastily aroused cowboys. Some of them were trouserless, but all carried their revolvers.

"What's the matter? What is it?" shouted Mr. Merrill's voice.

"Dad, it's horse thieves!" shouted Jack.

"Some of Black Ramon's bunch, for a bet!" roared Bud Wilson, emerging with a lantern and vaulting into the corral.

"Oh, the dirty scoundrels!" he broke out the next instant.

"What is it? What have they done, Bud?" cried Jack, who realized from the usually impassive vaquero's tone that something very much was amiss.

"Why, they've taken the pick of the bunch! Look here, Firewater's gone, my calico, and——"

"But they've left some horses. Quick! Let's get after them. We can overtake them!" urged

Mr. Merrill, who had hastily thrown on some clothes, and, followed by the professor, was now down at the corral.

"We can't," wailed Bud; "the precious rascals have hamstrung all the horses they didn't want."

A chorus of furious voices broke out at this. Black Ramon, if it were he or his band that had made the midnight raid, had planned it cleverly. It would be hours before fresh horses could be rounded up from the "remuda," and the poor animals remaining had been crippled fatally. Few minds but that of a Mexican could have conceived of such a fiendish act. The unfortunate animals, uncomplainingly, as is the manner of horses, were lying about the corral, looking up at the men about with mute agony in their large eyes.

"Oh, blazes! if I could get my hands on that greaser!" roared Bud Wilson.

"Steady now, Bud, steady!" said Mr. Merrill, though his own frame trembled with rage at the needless brutality of the raiders. "Hard words will do no good now."

"Let's keep quiet a minute. Maybe we can hear the clatter of their hoofs," said one of the

cowboys, a young chap who had come to the ranch from a peaceful California range not long before.

"Not much chance of that," said Bud Wilson bitterly. "Those chaps had the hoofs of their own mounts and the ones they stole all muffled—you can bet your Sunday sombrero on that."

"That's why they made so little noise when they led them off," said Ralph. But in the general agitation no one paid any attention to him.

Everybody was rushing about asking questions, giving orders, hastening this way and that with lanterns. Even the Chinese cook was out with a frying pan in his hand, seemingly under the impression that it was up to him to cook something.

It was Mr. Merrill who first found his head.

"Silence!" he cried in a stern, ringing voice. "You, Bud, select two men and put these poor brutes here out of their pain."

"If it's all the same to you, boss, will you give that job to some one else?" said Bud, with a queer little break in his voice. "I've rode some of them plugs."

"All right, then. Your job will be to round up a dozen of the best nags you can find from the Escadillo pasture. Get a bite to eat, take two men with you, and start right now. Don't lose a minute."

Bud Wilson hastened off. He didn't want to be near the corral when the shots that told that the ham-strung beasts were being put out of their misery were heard.

"What are they going to do?" whispered Ralph, as two cowboys finally climbed into the corral with their revolvers drawn.

"Kill those poor brutes. It's the only thing to do with a hamstrung horse," said Jack bitterly, turning away.

Ralph, having no more wish than his friend to see the final chapter of the raiders' visit, followed him. As they turned they almost ran into the professor.

The estimable scientist, in his agitation, had just thrown aside a valuable book, and held tightly to a piece of straw, under the impression that he had thrown away the straw and kept the book. Jack picked up the volume and handed it to the

professor. To his surprise, however, the man of science waved the book aside, and the boys could see in the moonlight that a new light, foreign entirely to their usual mild radiance, beamed in his eyes.

"No, no!" he said in a sharp voice, one which the boys had never heard him use before. "No books now. What I want is a rifle and a horse. I never knew I was a man of blood till this moment, but—but I'm hanged if I wouldn't like a shot at those—ahem—I believe they are called greasers, and a good name for the rascals!"

"Good for you, professor!" exclaimed Jack; "and if we have our way, you'll get your chance before long. We're going to take the trail after those rascals as soon as Bud and the others get the horses."

"Oh, Jack, are we to go?" gasped Ralph.

"Well, if we don't, something's going to drop!" said Jack in a determined tone. "They've taken my little Firewater, and I've got something to say to them on my own account."

"Say," exclaimed Ralph suddenly, as the pro-

fessor and the boys hastened toward the house, "I want to take back something I said yesterday."

"What's that?"

"That there are no adventures left in the modern West."

Jack, even in the midst of his agitation, could not help laughing at Ralph's earnest tone.

"I wonder what they'd think at Stonefell if they could see us now," he mused. Suddenly he pointed toward the professor, who was angrily shaking a fist at the Southern sky, where the saw-like outline of the Hachetas cut the moonlit horizon.

"And what would his Latin class say if they could see him?"

"That he was all right!" rejoined Ralph, with deep conviction.

Inside the great living room of the ranch house, with its brightly colored rugs on the dark wood floor and walls, and a blaze leaping in its big open hearth, for the night was chilly, the Chinese cook was already setting out a meal, when the boys entered. Mr. Merrill, his brow furrowed with deep thought, was walking up and down. He

looked up as his son and Ralph entered, and spoke quickly.

"You boys had better remain at the ranch," he said. "We are not likely to be gone long and——"

He stopped short. The blank faces of the two lads had caused him to break into a broad smile despite the seriousness of his mood.

"Why, why," he said amusedly, "surely you didn't expect to come along?"

"Why, dad, of course. They've taken my Fire-water, the rascals, and I've got a personal interest in the thing."

"And I, sir," began Ralph, "I am out here for experience, you know."

"Well, you certainly seem to be getting it. I am half inclined to allow you to come. I must attach one condition to it, however, and that is that you obey orders implicitly, and if any danger arises that you will do your best to conceal yourselves from it."

"What, run away—oh, dad!" began Jack, but his father cut him short.

"Accept my conditions or stay here, Jack."

"Very well, then, dad, we accept—eh, Ralph?"

The Eastern boy nodded. Not for the world would he have missed what was to come. And now the professor spoke up.

"Mr. Merrill, sir, I shall take it as a favor if you will provide a horse for me. In my young days I was not unaccustomed to equine pursuits, and I feel that I should make one of your party. I could wish, sir, to be in at the—the finish—if I may say so—of those ruffians."

"There is small likelihood of our catching them, professor," said Mr. Merrill, smiling at the other's excitement. "They have a long start. I am afraid you would only have a long, tiring ride for your pains."

"I am willing to chance it," said the professor simply. "I feel, in fact, that such a dash across the er—er, Rubicon would be classic, sir, classic, if nothing else."

"That being the case," said Mr. Merrill, checking his amusement, in view of the professor's evident earnestness, "you shall certainly come. But now breakfast, or supper, or whatever one may call the meal, seems to be ready. Let us sit

down and eat, for we have a long ride ahead of us."

During the meal Mr. Merrill was plied with questions by the eager boys. In fact, so numerous did the queries become, that he was relieved at last when a diversion offered in the shape of a clattering of hoofs outside the door.

"Rap!" came at the portal.

"Ah, the horses at last!" exclaimed Mr. Merrill, eagerly rising to his feet, and betraying by his haste how anxious he was to be off, despite his assumed indifference.

"Come in!" he called in answer to the rap.

The boys looked expectantly confident of seeing the familiar features of Bud Wilson.

To their astonishment, however, the newcomer was a total stranger. A small, swarthy Mexican. He wore bear-skin chapareros, and seemed to have ridden far and hard. At the sight of him they all sprang to their feet, so complete was their surprise at the unexpected nationality of their visitor.

CHAPTER VI.

TAKING UP THE TRAIL

The new arrival replied to Mr. Merrill's look of inquiry by a voluble flood of Spanish. When he paused for breath, the rancher, who understood the language perfectly, turned to the professor and his young companions.

"This man, if he is to be relied upon, has furnished us with a valuable clue," he said. "According to him the rustlers passed him headed for Grizzly Pass not more than an hour ago. If this is so, then we stand a good chance of overtaking them. The ground there is rough, and, not expecting pursuit, they will take it easy. In fact, this fellow says that when he saw them they were camping."

"You think he is to be relied on?" asked the professor.

"Well, that remains to be seen. He tells a

straight enough story. He says he is a sheepman who has a few hundred head in the highlands near the cañon. While camped in a small pass leading off the main cañon, he overheard these fellows talking about the trick they played, and decided to inform me at once. He sneaked quietly out of his camp, saddled a horse he had there, and rode hard till he arrived here."

At this moment a fresh trampling of hoofs announced that Bud and his companion had returned with the "remuda" horses, and soon after Bud himself entered the room.

In leather chapareros, high-heeled riding-boots and jingling spurs, he looked every inch the cow-puncher as he handled his revolver grimly.

"We're about ready when you are, boss," he said.

"Oh, yes—all right, Wilson. But I've got something I want to tell you."

Rapidly Mr. Merrill ran over the story of the Mexican sheep-herder.

"What do you think of it?" he asked, as he concluded.

"Wa'al, it *sounds* all right," admitted Bud reluctantly, "but this yer feller's a greaser, boss, and——"

"Oh, I know, Wilson, but after all, what can happen to us? We will be a strong party, and we'll take him along with us. He says he's willing to go."

"Of course, that makes it different," admitted Bud; "but my advice would be to make him ride with a lariat round his neck, so that at the first sign of treachery we can string him up with neatness and dispatch."

"We can't do that," smiled Mr. Merrill, while Bud glared at the Mexican, "but we can have him ride right with us, and then there will be no danger of his playing us false."

"You understand what will happen to you if you ain't on the level with us?" demanded Bud of the Mexican, placing his hands about his own throat with a ferocious and significant expression.

"Si, señor," nodded the Mexican.

"All right, then. That being the case, you can't

blame us if anything comes off that don't happen to be on your future schedule of events."

Soon after this conversation the expedition started. Dawn was just breaking as they clattered out from under the cottonwoods that surrounded the ranch house. They were a grim, determined-looking band. On each man's saddle he carried slung before him his rifle, and with the exception of Ralph and the professor, every one of those ten riders was a crack shot. Behind each cow-puncher's cantle was tied a roll of blankets, and besides their lariats each saddle horn held suspended a quart canteen full of water. Two pack animals, selected for their speed, carried a camping outfit and cooking utensils. Complete as was the organization, it had taken little more than half an hour to get it ready for the start.

"Hi-yi!" yelled Jack, bringing down his quirt over his pony's flanks. "It's good to hit the trail and get some action."

"Same here," rejoined Ralph, pressing up alongside of him.

The two boys urged their ponies to an easy lope. As for some miles to come there was no

necessity for them to travel with the main body of the men, they kept it up till they were some distance ahead. Mr. Merrill had decided that there was no danger to be apprehended till the mountains were actually reached, and his consent had been gained before the boys loped off alone.

Suddenly another rider spurred into view, coming from the opposite direction to the boys and the Merrill party.

"Walt Phelps!" cried Jack with a glad shout.

The other returned the greeting and soon learned the news from Agua Caliente.

Soon the three boys were riding forward together. Walter Phelps, it appeared, had heard rumors that the rustlers had been abroad in the night, and had risen early and saddled for a ride to the Merrill ranch. He was much concerned when he learned of the rancher's loss, and volunteered to join the party.

To this Mr. Merrill entered no objection, and the three boys rode side by side all the morning. The noonday camp was made in a small arroyo immediately below a frowning spur of the

Hachetas. The foothills had been growing more and more rugged as the advance was made, and now the party might fairly be said to be in the mountains themselves. By skirting two more spurs they would be in Grizzly Pass in less than an hour. The character of the scenery was gloomy and grand in the extreme. The rugged and mysterious mountains, clothed darkly, almost to their summits, with scrub-oak, fir and piñon trees, seemed to Ralph to promise all kinds of adventure.

The noonday meal was a hasty one. As soon as it was dispatched the party pressed on without pausing for further rest. The road now grew so rough that the trail of the stolen horses, which had at first been plain and clear, could no longer be seen. The Mexican guide, closely guarded by Bud Wilson and a cowboy named Coyote Pete, rode in front. Close behind came Mr. Merrill, the three boys and the professor, and in their rear followed the half-dozen cowboys who formed the remainder of the expedition.

"Are we getting near the place now, Jose?"

asked Mr. Merrill, addressing their guide by the name he had given, about the middle of the afternoon.

“Si, señor,” rejoined the guide, who soon after directed the cavalcade toward the mouth of the pass through which he said the stolen horses had been driven.

If the mountains had been gloomy and sinister to the view while riding along the base of them, the northern entrance to Grizzly Pass itself threw a damper over the spirit of even Coyote Pete, who had hitherto larked about and displayed a great fund of high spirits. The dark wall of the cañon rose perpendicularly to a height of more than a hundred feet on the right side of the rough trail. At the other hand was a deep and dark abyss at the bottom of which a hidden river roared. Beyond the formidable pit reared another frowning rampart of sheer rock. Deep down could be heard the murmuring of water.

“That’s the overflow from the big dam,” explained Walter Phelps, pointing over into the sonorous depths.

"The dam is up in this direction, then?" inquired Ralph.

"Yes, it is located in a small cañon, off to the right of the pass. I'll show you the place when we reach it."

For some time they rode on without a word. The deep gloom and oppressive silence was not encouraging to conversation. The sound of a stone dislodged by a pony's hoof in that dismal place caused several of the party to give a nervous start more than once.

Suddenly the right-hand wall of the cañon opened out—as they rounded a sharp promontory of rock—and another deep chasm cut abruptly into Grizzly Pass almost at right angles. The deep rift which this caused across the trail had been bridged by a span of rough logs which crossed the intersecting cañon at a height of fully three hundred feet. A scene of wilder and more impressive grandeur than the cañon presented at the point they had now reached not one of the party had ever beheld. Even a whisper went echoing and reverberating among the gloomy

rocks in startling contrast to the brooding silence of the spot.

The frowning black walls, the melancholy-looking trees clinging to the almost perpendicular walls, the bottomless chasm, and the deep dusk of late afternoon, all combined to make it the most oppressive scene into which any of the boys had ever penetrated.

They had reached the bridge and the feet of the Mexican guide's horse were upon it, when from behind them there came a sudden startling sound.

The loud report of a rifle, followed by another and another, re-echoed behind them seemingly high up among the rocks.

Bang! Bang! Bang! came the explosions.

Instantly, Mr. Merrill and Bud wheeled their horses sharply and faced round toward the danger. At the same instant Coyote Pete set up a yell:

"Buncoed, by ginger!"

He pointed ahead as he dashed across the bridge in pursuit of their treacherous guide, who was galloping off up the cañon at top speed.

He had taken advantage of the confusion to escape. Without an instant's thought as to what they were doing, the three boys pressed spurs to their animals and thundered across the flimsy structure after the cow-puncher. The professor's horse became unmanageable in the excitement. The creature gave one tremendous plunge and with the unhappy scientist half on and half off its back, dashed across the bridge after the others.

In the meantime, Mr. Merrill and the cow-punchers had galloped back to where the firing still kept up. They all feared that they had been led into an ambush, and that the attack was from the rear.

"That yellow-skinned varmint betrayed us, after all," ground out Bud Wilson, as they dashed back. "Those shots were meant for us, and came from Black Ramon's men."

"Yes, we were wrong to trust him," rejoined Mr. Merrill, "but now we've been led into a trap, we've got to fight out of it the best way we can."

"You bet we will, boss," was Bud Wilson's rejoinder.

The firing on the hillside had now ceased, and the little cavalcade came to a halt.

"Not a soul to be seen," exclaimed Mr. Merrill.

"Well, that's funny," commented Bud. "This is where the firing was, for sure."

"Yep, right up above there," rejoined another cowboy, Sam Ellis, pointing upward on the hillside.

"What do you make of it, boss?" was Bud's next query.

"I don't know what to think," rejoined Mr. Merrill. "Perhaps we were mistaken, and the firing we heard came from hunters up on the hillside."

"Hunters! Not much chance of that," said Bud grimly. "Hunters who made all that racket would soon scare all the game in the country away. No, boss, you'll have to guess again. By *Jee-hosophat!*"

Slinking through the underbrush far above them, Bud's keen eyes had discovered the furtive form of a man who by his gay sash and high-coned hat seemed to be a Mexican. To think, with Bud, was to act. His rifle jerked up to his

shoulder as if automatically. As the weapon cracked sharply the man on the hillside gave a loud scream. Throwing his hands helplessly above his head, the next instant he came plunging and crashing downward through the brush.

"Got him!" gritted out Bud, grimly blowing through the barrel of his rifle to clear the smoke.

"Yip-ee!" yelled the cow-punchers at the successful shot.

Mr. Merrill looked grave.

"I didn't want any bloodshed, Bud," he said. "The boys—great heavens! where are they?"

He had wheeled suddenly and discovered that they were missing.

"Yes, and where's Pete, and where's the professor?" chimed in Bud.

Alarm showed on every countenance.

In the excitement, the absence of the members of the party who had spurred onward over the bridge had not been noticed. But now blank looks were exchanged. If they had galloped on—as there seemed to be no doubt they must have—by that time they were probably in serious straits.

"Wait till I get that varmint, and then I'll be with you," cried Bud, swinging off his pony.

The cow-puncher plunged up the hillside a few feet and picked up the Mexican, who had rolled down the steep incline to within a short distance of the trail.

"Is he dead?" asked Mr. Merrill anxiously, for the Mexican showed no sign of life.

"Not dead, but pretty near it," Bud rapidly diagnosed, ripping open the Mexican's shirt. "The bullet went right neighborly to his heart."

With surprising strength for one of his wiry build, Bud picked up and slung the wounded man over the saddle before him with a grim idea in his head that at some future time the fellow might be needed.

"Now then, boys!" cried Mr. Merrill, "those others may be in a bad pickle by this time. It may have been the purpose of this trap to get them over the bridge. It's up to us to get them out of it. I know you'll do all that lies in your power to help."

"You bet we will, boss," spoke up Ellis.

"Yip-yip-y-ee-ee!"

The cow-puncher's wild yell came from the bronzed throats with a will. The next instant the little cavalcade was off, clattering up the trail toward the bridge.

They swept rapidly round the small bluff of rock which had hidden the bridge from them while they had been investigating the mysterious shots. As the trail came full in view, a groan of disappointment burst from them.

The pass beyond the bridge was empty of life. Of their friends there was not a trace.

A terrible feeling that the worst had happened filled every heart.

"Come on, boys, we'll get 'em if we have to go to Mexico City for 'em," yelled Bud defiantly. "Wow!"

"That's the stuff—wow!" yelled the others.

With his exultant cry still in his throat, and his arm still waving, Bud drove in his spurs. He was about to dash upon the bridge, when suddenly the structure heaved upward before his eyes and the whole world seemed to turn to red flame. A fiery wind singed his face.

There was a roar that filled the air, the sky—

everything. The earth rocked and breathed hotly under the cow-pony's feet. Bud felt his broncho suddenly fall from under him and himself dropping like a stone into space. Desperately he clutched, grasped something solid, and drew himself up. Then, everything went out from his senses and the whole world grew dark.

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE HANDS OF THE ENEMY.

“What happened, Bud?”

Mr. Merrill, stanching a wound in his head with his hand, sat upright on the edge of the dark gorge across which a few moments before there had been a bridge. Now there was none. Only sullen wisps of yellowish smoke curling upward and a strong, acrid smell in the air.

Sheer below the rancher, the naked rocks shot down, bare of foothold. Deep down at the bottom rushed the river which carried water from the land company's dam down to the valley. The dam lay up the cañon to the west.

Bud Wilson was crawling about dazedly on his hands and knees. All about were plunging horses and rock-wounded men. The still stupefied Bud looked up as the rancher impatiently repeated his question.

"Dynamite!—the yellow-skinned reptiles," he growled, "and if that charge had been touched off right we should all have been at the bottom of that gorge with my poor horse."

He gazed over the ragged, explosive-riven edge, and shuddered, as far below him he sighted a dark mass lying among the brush and trees at the bottom of the gulch.

"Yes, it was dynamite beyond a doubt," agreed the rancher; "but how did we escape the dreadful fate they had prepared for us?"

Bud Wilson shrugged his shoulders.

"I reckon the feller they left to press the button got rattled and touched it off too soon," he rejoined. "They're a jumpy lot, these greasers."

"Thank Heaven that none of us is seriously hurt," said Mr. Merrill, looking about him. "I do not believe that any one has suffered more than a few cuts from flying rocks."

This proved to be the case. The escape of the party when the bridge had been blown up had indeed been miraculous.

"Why should they have delayed to set off the charge till we came back? Why not have set it

off when we were all on the bridge, before we wheeled round to discover the origin of the shots on the hillside?" asked Mr. Merrill.

"Well, boss, it looks this way to me," said Bud, after a period of deep thought. "Them fellows had the trap all set and calculated that when we heard the firing we should stop and hesitate—as we did. Well, that, I take it, was the time that that charge should have been touched off, but somehow connections missed. We weren't on the bridge. That fellow with the rifle fired too quick. Then, too, them boys and Pete taking off after that treacherous varmint wasn't calculated on by them, in all probability, and what with one thing and another they missed their guess on the first charge."

"And on the second, too, by Christmas!" chimed in Ellis. "There ain't a pony missin' but the one you rode, Bud, and there ain't a man of us hurt; even that greaser you had on your saddle-bow got bucked off when your pony was blown over the edge."

"By the great horn spoon, that's right," said

Bud, walking over to where the wounded Mexican lay.

"Still unconscious," he said, after a brief examination. "If only he could talk, boss," the cow-puncher added whimsically.

"That would do us no good, Bud," rejoined Mr. Merrill. "It would give us no clue to the fate of my poor boy and the others."

"Wouldn't it, boss?" echoed Bud. "Wa'al, in my opinion this saffron coyote here deserves careful keeping for future reference, for I believe he holds the key to the whole mystery."

"Heaven grant he does," breathed Mr. Merrill, his heart sinking as he thought of the possible destiny of Jack and his friends. "Without his aid I don't see what we are to do."

"Well," said Bud cheerfully, "ain't no good worryin'. We'll get 'em out of it all right, never fear, boss."

"Thanks, Bud, I hope we will," said Mr. Merrill, bravely putting his anxiety from him as best he could. "But the thing to do now is to find a safe place to camp for the night. We should not be overtaken by darkness in such a trap as this."

"I guess there's not much danger of an attack now," said Bud bitterly. "I wish there was. I'd give a new saddle for a crack at one of them greasers."

Soon afterward, with Bud riding double behind Ellis, and Mr. Merrill's saddle bearing the wounded Mexican, the sorrowful party began the journey back down the cañon. With every sense and muscle aching for action, they were compelled to await the decision of time. The clew to the attack, and the whereabouts of Black Ramon and his gang, lay in the hands of one man, and that man was unable to speak. No wonder that as they rode, the thought in Mr. Merrill's mind was to get medical attendance for their wounded foe as soon as possible, and in the meantime give him the best of care.

As Bud had said, he might be valuable for future reference.

* * * * *

As their ponies' hoofs hammered over the rough bridge the Border Boys' minds had burned with but one thought. They must capture the treacherous guide who, it appeared only too evi-

dently, had led them into a trap. As their mounts flew by a dense brush mass on the rocks at the farther side of the precipitous gorge, they had glimpsed for a second a crouching figure. But such was their wish to catch up with the treacherous Jose that they paid the figure no attention. Yet had they done so, they might have prevented the destruction of the bridge. The crouching man was one of Black Ramon's followers, and in the brush was concealed the battery from which led the wires which were to blow up the bridge.

"I'd give a new lariat right now to have my fingers on that sneaking coyote's throat," gritted out Walt Phelps, as the ponies loped swiftly along.

A little ahead of the Border Boys, rode the large, angular figure of Coyote Pete, bestriding his big, raw-boned bay with the careless ease of the old plainsman. The ends of his scarlet handkerchief whipped out behind his neck, and he gnawed his long, straw-colored mustache nervously as he kept his keen, blue eyes, with a maze of little desert furrows round them, centered on the crouching figure of the Mexican

ahead. The professor having by this time checked his horse and recovered his equilibrium, gazed about as eagerly as the rest.

The treacherous Jose, however, seemed to have a good mount, for even Coyote Pete's powerful bay, and the active little ponies bestrode by the boys, failed to draw up on him even after a mile of fast riding.

"That horse-stealing son of a rattlesnake has a good bit of horse flesh there," grunted the cowboy, turning in his saddle without slackening speed.

"Say," said Walt, "we've come quite a distance, Pete, and there is no sign of the others. Don't you think it would be a good idea to turn back and see what has become of them?"

"Don't know but what it might," answered Pete, reining in his horse till it was going ahead at a gentle, "single-footed" trot. He gave his mustache a perplexed tug and an apprehensive look came into his eyes.

"What's the trouble, Pete?" asked Jack.

"Why, I was just thinking that we've come too far as it is," rejoined the plainsman in a worried

tone. "If any of Ramon's men are sneaking around here now they've got us in a fine trap."

He pointed down the trail. A backward view of the way they had come was cut off by a projecting promontory of rock. For anything they knew to the contrary, the trail behind them might be full of Mexicans, ready to capture them.

"We're in a bad place for sure," agreed Walt Phelps, shoving back his sombrero and scratching his red thatch. "Let's be getting back. There's no chance of catching that miserable Jose now, anyway."

"Yes, let's get back," agreed Ralph, who was beginning to feel anything but easy in his mind.

They wheeled their wiry little horses and Pete swung his big bay. As they faced about, a simultaneous exclamation of astonishment broke from each one of the party.

From behind the projection of rock there had suddenly appeared five figures. Slightly in advance of the others rode a tall man on a magnificent black horse, whom the party from the foothills, with the exception of the professor, had no difficulty in recognizing as Black Ramon himself.

With a quick exclamation, Pete reached for his revolvers, but Ramon checked him with an eloquent wave of his hand behind him. Each of his followers held a rifle, and these weapons covered the Border Boys and their older companions.

"Another move like that, Señor Pete," said Black Ramon, "and four of your party are food for the buzzards. I myself will attend to the fifth."

While Pete hesitated, the ruffian from across the border whipped out a silver-mounted pistol from his sash and held it leveled, while a somber smile flitted across his countenance.

"Yesterday it was your turn—now it is mine," he said, turning to the alarmed Ralph.

At the same instant there sounded a sullen, booming roar, and the earth beneath their feet quivered as if an earthquake had shaken it.

"What was that?" exclaimed Pete involuntarily.

"That," said Black Ramon, "was the wiping out of the last link that bound you to your friends."

"You—you've blown up the bridge!" gasped out Jack, realizing what the other's words meant.

"Yes. It will be some time, I fancy, before the gorge is passable once more. In the meantime, you are to be my guests *across the border*."

As he spoke, a score more of the cattle-rustlers came clattering down the trail, hidden behind the rock from which the others had appeared. They had been concealed there, as Pete now bitterly realized, while the Border Boys and the cow-puncher had blundered blindly into the Mexican's trap.

"I'll never forgive myself, Jack," he said under his breath to the rancher's son.

"Oh, pshaw, Pete, it wasn't your fault," rejoined Jack. "We'll find some way out of it."

"I dunno," grunted Pete. "We're going across the border, and there's precious little law there but what you make for yourself."

A few moments later, resistance being worse than useless, the party had been relieved of its weapons, and with ten or more cattle-rustlers riding in front, and the rest trailing behind the prisoners, the ride through the pass was resumed.

CHAPTER VIII.

BLACK RAMON'S MISSION.

As darkness fell they emerged from the gloomy shadows of the divide into a country not unlike that on the American side of the range. Foot-hills covered with scanty growth, and here and there a clump of scraggly cottonwoods intersected by deep gullies, and dry watercourses, were the chief features of the scenery. There was little conversation among the prisoners as they rode along, nor indeed did their position bear discussing. Pete's mind was busy with self-reproach, Jack's with trying to devise some means of escape, Walt Phelps' with what his father would imagine had become of him, and Ralph's and the professor's with real alarm.

"I am a man of considerable reading," muttered the professor gloomily, "yet our present

position goes to show that all the book-learning in the world is of no use to men in our position."

"No, I guess Coyote Pete, or Jack Merrill, or Walt Phelps could get us out of this a whole lot quicker than all the classical authors that ever classicked," said Ralph disgustedly.

"I have a fine library at home in the East," said the professor suddenly, and with the air of a man in whose mind a great hope had sprung up. "Do you imagine that this Black Ramon, or whatever his name is, would consider taking that in exchange for our liberty?"

"I'm afraid not," moaned Ralph disconsolately. Yet he could not forbear a smile at the old man's simplicity.

"Library," grunted Pete, who had overheard the professor's remark; "the only kind of library he'd have any use for would be an edition de luxury of a complete issue of greenbacks, bound in calf and horse hide."

"Where can they be taking us?" wondered Jack, as hour after hour passed, and the procession still wound on along the foot of the mountains.

"I've no idea," rejoined Walt Phelps, "I've never been on this side of the range before."

"I was over here oncet," said Pete, "after some strays, but I don't recollect this part of the country."

"How far have we come?" inquired Ralph, more for the sake of saying something than anything else.

"Not more than ten miles, I guess," rejoined Jack; "at night, and among these foothills, distances are very deceptive."

"They ain't so deceptive by half as these greasers," growled Pete. "I can't think of anything I'd rather be doing this instant than pounding the stuffing out of that Jose."

"I can't think why father trusted him," exclaimed Jack.

"Why, that was natural enough," was Pete's rejoinder. "There didn't look to be a chance of his playing us false. If it hadn't been for that fusillade behind us we'd never have lost him. As it is, if only I hadn't lost my head and gone gallivanting off arter the critter, we'd have been safe now."

"Always providing that nothing has happened to father and the others," said Jack sadly.

"Yes. But cheer up, lad. Your father and Bud Wilson are two of the best plainsmen I know. They wouldn't go blundering blindfold into no trap, you can bet."

"I hope not," rejoined Jack, "but that explosion sounded ominous to me. If the bridge is gone they may have gone with it."

"I don't think so," replied Pete. "Sounds travel a long distance in a narrow-walled pass like that, and the sound of a horse going over a bridge can be heard a big ways off at any time. If they'd been on the bridge when the explosion occurred we'd have heard their hoofbeats, anyhow, before they touched off the stuff."

"Well, I'm not going to give up hope till I know," said Jack bravely, though at the moment, had he not known the uselessness of it, he could have given way entirely to his apprehensions.

Suddenly, on rising from a dark gully, they came full in view of a low white building with a tower at one end. The rising moon tipped the structure with silver and showed its every outline

plainly, the black shadows sharply contrasted to its white walls and tiled roof.

"The old San Gabriel Mission!" exclaimed Pete, as his eyes fell on the venerable structure. "I thought I began to recognize the lay of the country a way back."

"You've been here before, then?" asked Ralph.

"Yep, after stray horses, as I said. I never knew, though, that Black Ramon and his gang hung out here."

"Well, they evidently do," rejoined Jack; "see, we are headed right for it."

They had begun to take a by-path which lay straight and white in front of them toward the old mission door. As they drew nearer, they could see that in the turret were hung several bells, probably part of a chime brought from Spain in the days when the mission was occupied by Holy Franciscans. It now appeared to be in half ruinous condition, however. Great cracks were in its walls, and several of the bell niches were empty. Here and there tiles had fallen from the roof, and the gaps showed black in the moonlight.

"A splendid specimen of Mission architecture," exclaimed the professor, lifting his hand in admiration, as they drew closer. "Rarely have I seen a finer, and in my younger days I spent some time exploring the Spanish remains in California."

"Well, I reckon it's going to be a splendid specimen of a jail for us," grunted Pete, with a side-long glance at the professor, who had quite forgotten his anxiety in his admiration of the old building.

Pete's words proved correct. A few minutes later the party—the prisoners carefully guarded in the center, drew up in front of the mouldering door, and Black Ramon gave three raps with a rusty knocker.

"Who's there?" inquired a voice from within, in Spanish.

"The Black Kings of The Pass," rejoined Ramon in a loud tone.

The door creaked open and a squat figure stood revealed. But the door opener was not a Mexican, but a white man, and no very favorable specimen of his race, either.

"Jim Cummings!" gasped Coyote Pete, as his eyes fell on the other. "Well, the dern renegade!"

There was no time to ask questions just then. With a few rough words the prisoners were ordered to dismount, and were ushered under close guard into what seemed to have been the main body of the mission church. It had a high-vaulted ceiling, and a few windows high up from the floor and closely barred. Otherwise, it was bare, except for some straw thrown about as if for beds.

"You will stay here to-night," said Ramon, gruffly addressing the prisoners, "and in the morning we will talk."

Without another word he turned away, and the Border Boys and their companions heard the door close with a bang. Then came a metallic clang, which told that a heavy bar had been put in place outside.

"Bottled!" said Pete laconically, and with a calm that amazed Ralph.

"And corked!" added Walt.

Jack Merrill and Walt Phelps followed Pete's

lead in taking the situation calmly. As a matter of fact, it was the only thing to do, but small blame can attach to Ralph for sinking down despondently on some of the straw as he heard the bar clang as if proclaiming their doom. As for the professor, he was strolling about, poking the walls with an inquiring finger and gazing in rapt admiration at the blackened beams of the roof above them.

"Well, there's one thing to be glad over," said Jack suddenly, "they haven't tied us."

"No need to," rejoined Pete. "We couldn't get out of here in a week, and—— Hark!"

They all listened intently. Outside they could hear the steady tramp-tramp of a man pacing up and down.

"A sentry!" exclaimed Walt Phelps.

"That's what. We're too valuable to Black Ramon for him to have us get away."

There seemed to be some hidden meaning underlying the cow-puncher's words, and the boys looked at him inquiringly.

"What I mean is," said the cow-puncher, "that this varmint sees a chance to make some money

out of us. He knows your father would give a pile to get you back safe and sound, and I'll bet a busted sweat-leather he's going to hold you for ransom."

"But you, Pete?"

"Wall, I reckon he'll make *chile-con-carne* out of me," rejoined the cow-puncher with a grin. "I'm too tough for anything else."

A careful examination of the place, made as well as they could in the moon-checked darkness, showed that Pete's diagnosis of their prison as "a bottle" was a correct one. The walls were solid, and appeared, just judging by the depth of the window embrasures, to be several feet thick. The windows themselves were far too high up to reach, even had they not been barred. The floor, after a careful tapping, yielded no sign of being hollow in any place.

"I was hoping we might find a hollow place somewhere," said Pete, in explaining this last maneuver. "You know these old padres lived a scary kind of life, and every once in a while their Indian converts would up and backslide and attack the church mission. So as they could do a

quick getaway when such contingencies came loping along, they used to make tunnels, but I guess if these fellers that built this place tunneled they did it some other part."

"What you say is correct," chimed in the professor, more as if he was in the lecture room than a prisoner across the border, in the hands of ferocious cattle-rustlers; "the padre sometimes dug these tunnels so that they covered considerable distances. Burrows of this character, a mile or even more in length have been found in California."

"Wa'al, I wish we had the tools handy and we'd bore one ourselves," said Pete; "but as we ain't, the best thing we can do is to make ourselves as comfortable as possible and go to sleep. Things won't get no better for fretting over them, and we're in a fix now where things is bound to get a lot worse before they get better."

The cow-puncher, suiting the action to the word, lay down, and in a few moments his snores proclaimed that he slept. One after the other, the rest dozed off, till only Ralph remained awake. Jack Merrill had done his best to cheer the East-

ern lad up before he sought refuge in slumber, but Ralph's position weighed on his mind too keenly to permit him to sleep. While the others lay stretched out in slumber he arose and began pacing the old church. He was not a superstitious lad, but the silence of the empty vaulted place, their position, and the uncertainty of their fate, all combined to fill him with a nervous dread.

Suddenly he stopped short in his pacing to and fro. Every nerve in his body tingled and his scalp tightened with alarm at a sudden sound he had heard.

Proceeding, it seemed, from the very masonry of the edifice itself, there had come a sound, which heard as it was, in those gloomy surroundings, was as terrifying as could be imagined.

"Who is there?" shouted the boy in frightened tones.

But the sound which he had heard ceased instantly. Nor, though he listened almost till dawn crept into the sky, and sleep overcame him, was it repeated.

CHAPTER IX.

A MOMENTOUS INTERVIEW.

"What can you compare the sound to?" asked Jack.

It was the next morning, and Ralph was relating his experiences.

"Well, it sounded like some one 'tap-tapping,' as well as I can explain it," replied Ralph.

"Whereabouts?" asked Walt, leaning forward from the interested circle.

"I don't know. It seemed to come from everywhere at once."

"But it stopped right off when you hollered?" asked Pete.

"Yes. I didn't hear another sound."

"What do you suppose it could have been, Pete?" asked Jack.

"Dunno. Mexican woodpecker, maybe," grinned the cow-puncher, "or maybe a little overdose of im-ag-in-at-ion."

"I tell you I couldn't have been mistaken," exclaimed Ralph hotly. "I heard it as clearly as I hear your voice now."

At this moment the clank of the metal bar of the door falling announced that the portal was about to be opened, and they all gazed upward expectantly as the studded oak swung back. Two figures appeared. The first was that of a Mexican carrying a big tray of steaming food and a water-cooler. The other newcomer was the renegade cowboy, whom Pete had recognized the night before.

"Well, they don't mean to starve us, anyhow," said Jack, as his eyes fell on the food.

"Hum, poisoned, like as not," put in Ralph.

"I confess that I would dare even poison, such are my pangs of hunger," spoke the professor.

Pete did not say a word, but kept his eyes fixed on the renegade cow-puncher.

"Nice business you're in, Jim Cummings," he growled. "Since when have you become a cattle-rustling, tamale-eating greaser?"

"Now, see here, Pete, don't rile me," growled the other, a short, red-faced man with bow legs

and whiny voice. "What I'm doing is my own business, and I reckon I can mind it."

"Yes, some folks don't mind what they do," observed Coyote Pete grimly, "even down to associating with a bunch of cattle thieves and horse-rustlers."

"There's a real nice specimen of the human toad," he went on, turning to his companions. "That feller yonder, Jim Cummings, was once a decent white man, punching cattle and shooting up the town on pay nights, like a Christian. Now look at him——"

But Jim Cummings had turned and was running for his life. He could not stand the raking cross fire of Pete's biting sarcasm. The Mexican who had brought them their food followed him out.

"Why, we could have overpowered those fellows and escaped," said Jack. "If we could once get our ponies, we'd give these ruffians a race to the pass, and——"

"Yep, but that 'If' is a big word, sonny," said Pete grimly. "I reckon you didn't see something I did when that door opened."

"No—what?" chorused the boys.

"Why, four of the handsomest looking rascals unhung parading up and down with rifles. But let's get some of this grub down. That Black Ramon is likely to pay us a call after grub time, and if I'd see him first he'd take my appetite away."

Despite Ralph's gloomy fears of poison, they made a good breakfast, although some of the dishes were so peppery and fiery they could hardly eat them.

"If Peary could have had some of this at the North Pole," said Jack, as he hastily swallowed several gulps of water.

"Or Doc Cook," grinned Walt.

"Yes, and *if* we could be in Albuquerque right now," laughed Coyote Pete.

As he spoke the door opened once more, this time to give entrance to the Mexican leader himself. As if he was not inclined to take any chances in trusting himself with the Americans, Ramon de Barrios was accompanied by two other of his countrymen. He lost no time in coming to the point.

"You boy there, Stetson," he said, pointing to Ralph, "how much is your father worth?"

"I suppose about five million dollars," said Ralph wonderingly.

"Phew!" exclaimed Coyote Pete, "I didn't know there was so much money in the world."

"Silence," growled Diego, looking at him from under his black brows. "And your father loves you?" he went on to Ralph.

"Yes, of course," rejoined the Eastern boy.

"Hum! Well, if you ever want to see him again you must do as I say."

"What is that?"

"Write him a letter telling him to send a messenger with twenty thousand dollars to a place I shall designate. If he does so I will let you go free. If not—well——"

Black Ramon compressed his lips and gave Ralph a look not pleasant to see. It seemed to promise ominously for the future.

"But what about my friends?" demanded Ralph.

"The same condition applies to Merrill, only

in his case, as his father is poorer, I shall be considerate and only demand ten thousand dollars."

"You can have my answer now," spoke up Jack. "It is—'No'!"

"The same goes here," chimed in Ralph slangily, but with conviction.

"What, you won't do it? Boys, you must be mad. You do not know the means I can use to enforce my demand. If you fear to cause your parents alarm, I can cause them more suffering by sending them word that you are dead."

The Mexican gave a smile of triumph as he saw a serious look cross the boys' faces. The thought of what this would mean—of the grief into which it would plunge their families, made them shiver, but neither hesitated when the cattle-rustler asked once more:

"Well, what do you say?"

"Still—no," said Jack.

"That's me!" snapped Ralph.

"In any event," demanded Jack, "suppose we did sign, what would you do with our friends?"

"That would concern me only," said the Mexican. "As for this cow-puncher here——"

"Mister Pete De Peyster is my name," spoke up Coyote Pete, caressing his yellow mustache.

"Well, De Peyster, then, I have an old score to even up with you——"

"Oh, you mean about the time I snaked you off your horse when you were going to ill-treat a pony," said Pete. "Yep, I reckon the bump you landed with must have left some impression on your greaser mind."

Black Ramon stepped forward. It looked for a second as if he was going to strike the venturesome cow-puncher, but instead he restrained himself and remarked in a calm voice, even more terrible than a raging tone would have been:

"As you are in my power to do as I like with, I will not discuss the matter with you. I will think it over. You know I am good at thinking up original punishments."

Jack shuddered at the level, cold-blooded tones of the man. Some of the most terrible tales of the border had to do with the fiendish tortures thought of by the man before them. But Pete was undismayed, at least outwardly.

"Anyhow, Ramon," he said, "you ought to get

somebody to touch off your dynamite who will be on the job when wanted. That fellow you had on the battery at the bridge must have got cold feet at the critical moment, eh? If he had touched off the charge at the right time he could have blown us all to Kingdom Come. As it is, Mr. Merrill and Bud Wilson are safe, and sooner or later they'll take it out of your yellow hide, whatever you may do to us now."

Now Pete had an object in talking thus. He wanted if possible to find out what had become of the ranch party when the bridge was blown up. If he expected to learn anything, however, he was disappointed, as the Mexican was far too crafty to be led into so easy a trap.

"Oh-ho. you are trying to draw me out to learn what became of your friends," he grinned. "Well, what if I should tell you they were blown up?"

"Wa'al, personally, I'd say you were an all-fired liar!" drawled Pete.

"Before long, what you say will not matter," snarled the Mexican, "you, or the boy Walt Phelps. I owe your father a grudge," he contin-

ued, turning to the red-headed ranch boy, "and I mean to avenge myself with you."

Walter gazed back at the wretch as calmly as had Pete. He said nothing, however. He did not wish to betray by even a quaver in his voice that his feelings were in a state of tumult.

"As for you, you bony old man," said the Mexican, turning to professor Wintergreen, "I have a mind to marry you off to an old Indian squaw, and keep you 'round here as our medicine man."

"In that case I know the medicine I should prescribe for you," said the professor calmly.

"What, if you please?" asked the Mexican, with mock humility.

"Six bullets in the region of your black heart," snapped out the man of science.

"Bully! Good for you!" yelled Pete, capering about and giving the professor a slap on the back that sent the savant's spectacles flying.

"I will give you boys till to-morrow to think this over," said the Mexican, deciding, apparently, not to tamper any more with such an edged tool as the professor. "In the meantime, I have

decided to separate you. Merrill, you and this cow-puncher I shall confine elsewhere; you are too dangerous to leave with the rest of them."

He gave a shrill whistle and instantly ten men appeared from the door. Under Black Ramon's directions they bound and blindfolded Pete and Jack Merrill.

"I have a place where I keep such firebrands as you two," said Ramon in his most vindictive tone, as amid exclamations of dismay from their companions the cow-puncher and the ranchman's son were led from the old chapel.

CHAPTER X.

IN THE BELL TOWER.

Blindfolded, and almost bereft of the power of thought by the sudden order of the chief of cattle-rustlers, Pete and his young companion were led forth by Black Ramon's men. To Jack's surprise—for he had not noticed any building near to the old mission the night they had arrived—they seemed to travel some distance before they halted. Presently he felt their guides impelling him forward over what seemed to be a threshold.

Suddenly their eye bandages were roughly removed, and the two prisoners were able to look about them. They found themselves in a small chamber lighted by one tiny window high up on a whitewashed wall. The floor was of red tiling, and gave out a solid ring beneath the feet.

"I guess you'll be safe enough in here,"

grinned Ramon, gazing at the substantial walls and the huge door of iron-studded oak. "If you escape from this place you'll be cleverer than the cleverest Yankees I ever heard of."

After giving their guards some brief directions to keep a close watch on the door, Black Ramon strode out of the place. The portal was immediately banged to, and the prisoners were alone.

"Well, Jack, out of the frying-pan into the fire, eh?" said Pete, looking about him with a comical expression of despair.

"It certainly looks that way," agreed Jack; "and what's worse, we're cut off from our friends. I wonder what measures Ramon will use to compel Ralph to write that letter to his father," went on Jack.

"Kind of a weak sister, that there tenderfoot, ain't he?" asked Pete with a grin.

"I guess you've never seen Ralph charging down the gridiron in the last half, when the whole game hung on his shoulders or you wouldn't say that, Pete," reproved Jack. "There isn't a boy alive who is cleaner cut, or grittier

than Ralph Stetson, but he's not used to the West and I'm afraid that lemon-colored rascal may work some tricks on him."

"That's what I'm afraid of, too," chimed in Pete. "These greasers can think up some great ways to make a feller change his mind."

"If only we knew that dad and the rest were safe, I would feel easier in my mind," said Jack after a brief interval, during which neither had spoken.

"Boy," said Pete, in a tenderer tone than Jack had ever heard the rough cow-puncher use, "as I told you a while back, it's my solemn belief that Mr. Merrill and the rest are alive, and at this minute figuring out some way to get us out of this scrape. But if anything has happened to them, it's going to be the sorriest day in their lives for these Border greasers. There isn't a cow-puncher in New Mexico, or along the border from the Gulf to the Colorado River, that wouldn't take a hand in the trouble that's going to come."

This was an unusually long and an unusually earnest speech for Coyote Pete to make, and as

if ashamed of his display of emotion, he at once set to work looking busily about him.

What he saw was not calculated to elevate his spirits. The room, or rather chamber, was so small that its dimensions could not have exceeded six by seven or eight feet. It was, in fact, more a cell than a room.

In the massive oak door was a small peephole, high up, through which every now and then the evil face of one of their guards would peer.

"I wonder what he thinks we are up to?" asked Pete with a quizzical grin. "Not much room in here to do anything but think, and precious little of that."

"Where are we, do you think, Pete?" asked Jack, after another interval of silence.

"Haven't any idee," rejoined Pete. "I reckon we're quite some distance from the mission, though."

"Let's take a peep out of the door," said Jack suddenly. "That fellow hasn't looked in lately; maybe he's gone to dinner, or something."

"Well, there's no harm in trying, anyhow," said Pete, going toward the portal. "I can pull

myself up to the hole by my hands, and if he's there the worst that greaser can give me is a crack over the knuckles."

But as he placed his hands on the edge of the peephole Jack suddenly held up his hand.

"Hark!" he exclaimed.

From outside came a deep nasal rumble.

"Ach-eer, Ach-eer!"

"He's snoring!" exclaimed Pete.

"Off as sound as a top," supplemented Jack.

"Up you go, Pete."

But the cow-puncher, after a prolonged scrutiny, was only able to report that the passage outside was too dark for him to see anything.

"We'll try the window," suggested Jack.

"How are we going to get up there?"

"You boost me on your shoulders. I can see out then."

"All right," said Pete, making "a back."

Jack nimbly mounted the cow-puncher's shoulders and shoved his face into the window. As his eyes fell on the scene outside he gave a gasp of amazement.

In the distance were the rugged outlines of the

Hachetas, with the rolling foothills lying between. Beyond that rugged barrier—how far beyond Jack realized with an aching heart—lay the United States. But all this was not what caused him to gasp with surprise. It was the fact that, peering out of the window, he was looking directly down upon the tiled roof of the mission. Despite the fact that they had appeared to have been marched for a distance from it, they were still imprisoned in Black Ramon's stronghold in an upper story. In the belfry tower, in fact.

"Consarn it all," muttered the cow-puncher angrily, as Jack told him this, "I might have known they'd have adopted that old trick of blind-folding you and then walking you round in a circle. I defy any one to tell how far he's gone when those methods are used."

"Gee, I'd give a whole lot to be that fellow down below there," mused Jack, looking about him from his vantage point.

"What's he doing?" asked Pete.

"Practicing at a post with a lariat. He looks as happy as if——"

"He hadn't a sin on his greaser soul," Pete finished for him.

"Hullo!" exclaimed the Border Boy suddenly, still from his post on Pete's shoulder, "I can see Ramon going up to the lariat thrower. He's pointing up here."

The boy ducked quickly. An instant later he again looked out cautiously.

"I guess Ramon was changing the guard," he said. "I saw him point up here, and now that fellow's coming up to the tower entrance by a flight of open steps."

"Is he still carrying that lariat?" asked Pete, in a quick, eager voice.

"Yes; why?"

"Oh, never mind. I just wish I had it, that's all. It would help pass the time away. Say, get down, will you, Jack, if you've done enough gazing. You're getting to be a heavyweight."

"Well, if we stay here much longer I'll bant a few pounds," replied Jack. "I'm sure it's long after dinner time, and I'm hungry."

As if in answer to his words, the door opened and the same man he had seen practicing with

the rawhide in the yard below suddenly appeared. He put some food and water before them without a word, and withdrew silently. Not before Pete's sharp eyes had noticed, however, that at his waist was fastened the rawhide rope he coveted.

"Starvation isn't part of Ramon's plan, evidently," said Jack, as he ate with an appetite unimpaired by the perils of their situation.

"He's just waiting till to-morrow to see how a day's imprisonment has affected you," said Pete grimly. "If you still refuse to write to your father, he'll begin to put the screws on."

"Poor Ralph," sighed Jack.

"Oh, what wouldn't I give for a corncob pipe full of tobacco," sighed Pete, as their meal was concluded.

"What, you mean you could smoke with all this trouble hanging over us?" exclaimed Jack.

"Why not? It would help me to think. When I'm figgering out anything I always like to have a smoke."

"Then you have a plan?"

"I didn't say so."

"Oh, Pete, tell me what it is. Do you think we can escape?"

"Now, Jack, don't bother a contemplative man," said Pete provokingly. "I ain't going ter deny that I was indulging in speculation, but what I've been thinking out is such a flimsy chance that I'm downright ashamed to talk about it."

Jack, therefore, had to be content with sitting still on the floor of the cell, while Pete knitted his brows and thought and thought and thought.

So the afternoon wore away somehow, and it grew dark.

In the meantime, Jack, from Pete's shoulder, had taken another survey through the window, if such the hole in the solid wall could be called. A desperate hope had come to him that in the darkness they could squeeze through it, and in some way reach the ground. But it was an aspiration that a short survey of the situation was destined to shatter.

A sheer drop down the walls of the tower of a hundred feet or more lay between them and the ground. The only hope of escape lay by the door-

way, and the chance of that was so remote that the Border Boy did not let his thoughts dwell on it.

"I guess we don't get any supper," said Jack, as the light in the cell faded out and the place became as black as a photographer's dark room.

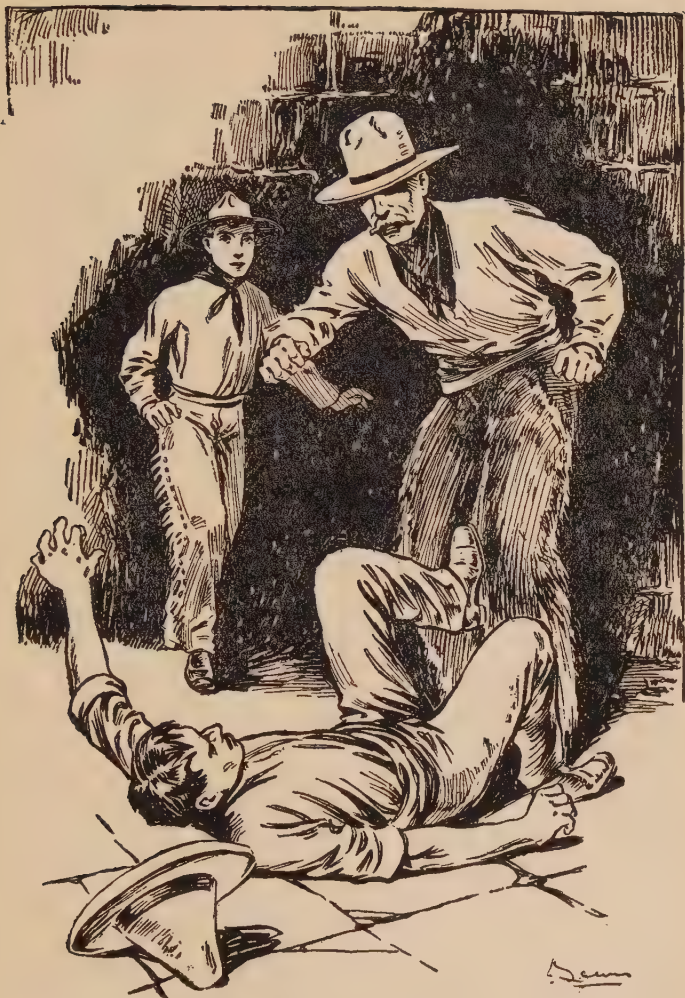
"Guess not," assented Pete gloomily. "I could go a visit to the chuck wagon, too. Curious how sitting in a cell stimerlates the appetite. I'd recommend it to some of them dyspetomaniacs you reads of back East."

"I should think that the disease would be preferable to the cure," said Jack.

"Reckon so," said Pete, and once more their talk languished. Two human beings, confined in a small cell, soon exhaust available topics of conversation.

Suddenly the door opened, and the man who had brought them their dinner appeared. As he came inside the cell Pete rapidly slipped to the door. As the cow-puncher had hardly dared to hope, a brief glance showed him the passage was empty.

Then things began to happen.



Backward he fell, and lay sprawling on the floor like some ungainly spider.

The Mexican, with a quick exclamation, had faced round as the cow-puncher made a dart for the portal, and leveled his pistol. Before he could utter the cry which quivered on his lips, Coyote Pete's knotty fist drove forward like a huge piston of flesh and muscle. The force of the blow caught the Mexican full in the face, almost driving his teeth down his throat. Backward he fell, and lay sprawling on the floor like some ungainly spider. The terrific concussion of the blow had rendered him temporarily unconscious.

"Quick, Jack," cried Pete, under his breath, swiftly shutting the great door.

"What are you going to do?" gasped the boy. Events had happened with such lightning-like rapidity that he had hardly had time to comprehend what had taken place, and stood staring at the limp form on the floor of the cell.

With quick, nervous fingers Pete, who had stooped over the fallen Mexican, seized the raw-hide rope he carried at his waist—the one with which Jack had seen the fellow practicing.

"Now then, up on my shoulders, Jack, and take the rope with you," he ordered.

Jack didn't know what was to come, but obeyed the resourceful plainsman without a question.

"Through the window," came Pete's next command, and then Jack began to understand the other's daring plan. Without waiting for further orders from Pete, he crawled through the opening. He no sooner found himself on a ledge outside before he turned cautiously and lay on his stomach across the broad embrasure and extended both his hands within. Pete grabbed them, and bracing his feet against the wall, soon clambered up. As the cow-puncher climbed and got a grip on the sill, Jack retreated along the narrow ledge outside. Presently Pete, too, clambered through and joined him.

"What next?" asked Jack in a low voice.

"Blamed if I know," rejoined Pete cheerfully.

The two adventurers were in about as insecure a position as could be imagined. Their feet rested on a ledge of masonry not much more than six inches in width, which circled the bell tower. The ground was a hundred feet or more below

them. The lariat they had with them, and which was securely fastened in Pete's belt, was not more than thirty feet at the most.

As they hesitated in the darkness, scarcely daring to breathe on their insecure perch, there came a sudden shout from within the tower.

"Wa'al, they've found out that something's up," grunted Pete, while Jack's blood seemed to turn to ice in his veins. Below them was empty space; above, the Mexican outlaws.

CHAPTER XI.

A DROP IN THE DARK.

“Hark!”

It was Jack who uttered the exclamation.

The shouts were growing louder. Evidently the Mexicans had kept a closer watch than he or Pete had imagined, and had quickly taken alarm at the prolonged absence of their companion.

The boy could hear them battering the oak door of the cell they had so recently occupied.

“Let ’em batter away,” muttered Pete. “I shot the bolt on the inside.”

To his amazement, Jack actually heard his companion chuckle. What could the cow-puncher be made of, steel or granite, or a combination of both!

And now Pete began to wriggle along the ledge, pressing with all his weight against the wall.

"Come on," he breathed to Jack, "throw all your weight inward and don't look up or down."

In mortal fear of finding his body hurtling backward into vacancy at any moment, the boy followed the intrepid cow-puncher along the narrow footpath. Perhaps it needed more pluck on his part to proceed along the insecure ledge in the pitchy blackness than it did on the part of the nervy cow-puncher. Who shall take the exact measure of courage?

At last they reached the angle of the tower, and Pete stood still. To proceed round the sharp angle, on no wider pathway than that which they trod, would be manifestly impossible. Yet go on they must. Suddenly Pete gave a cry of joy. Looking down into the darkness, he had seen, not more than ten feet beneath them, the sharp ridge of an addition to the old Mission church. If they could reach that he knew, from calculating the height of the tower, they would not be far from the ground.

Behind them the yells and shouts were growing louder.

To think, with Pete, was to act. With a mut-

tered prayer, one of the few he had ever uttered in his rough life, the cow-puncher crouched as well as he could on the ledge. Putting over first one leg and then the other, he deliberately dropped downward, till his hands gripped the edge of the ledge on which a second before he had stood. His muscles cracked as the sudden strain came on them, but he held fast, and a second later let go. He landed to his intense joy, on a rough tiled roof, after an easy drop of not more than four feet.

"Come on," he breathed upward to Jack, who had watched the cow-puncher's daring act with horrified eyes.

"I—I can't," shivered the boy, who, plucky as he was, dreaded the idea of a drop into the dark. "You go on, Pete, and leave me."

"Not much I won't. You make that drop, or I'll give you the biggest hiding you ever had, Jack Merrill, when I get hold of you."

The cowboy had hit on just the words to bring Jack to the proper pitch to take the leap.

"You ain't scared, are you?" whispered up

Pete, determined to brace the boy up in the way he knew would prove most effective.

Just as Pete had done a few moments previously, Jack, without a word, knelt for one awful second on the brink of space and then gingerly put over first one leg and then the other. Then followed the same terrible rush into blackness that Pete had experienced, and the same soul-sickening jolt and heart-leap as his fingers gripped, and he hung safe.

"Drop!" snapped Pete.

Jack's fingers obediently unclasped their desperate grip, and he shot downward to be caught in Pete's arms.

"Not so bad when you get used to it," whispered the cow-puncher. "Now then, slide down."

"Slide down—where?"

"This rope. While you were getting ready up there"—even in the dark Jack felt his cheeks flush—"while you were getting ready up there, I fastened that greaser's rope to this old water-spout. All you got to do is to slide down."

A second later Jack flashed down the side of

the old church to the ground, where, almost as soon as he had landed, Coyote Pete joined him.

"What now?" asked Jack amazedly. He had never dreamed when they stood on that dizzy tower that in less than ten minutes they would be on firm ground. Nor did he forget how much of the so-far successful escape was due to Coyote Pete's skill and resourcefulness. But the hardest and most dangerous part was yet to come.

Already the whole of the old church was aglow with lights, flashing hither and thither, and outside, shout answered shout from a dozen points of the compass.

"We'll run in the direction where there is the least racket," wisely decided Pete.

"Crouch as low as you can, Jack," he ordered, as, doubled almost in half, he darted off into the darkness.

Imitating his guide as best he could, Jack followed, but as ill-luck would have it, their way led past an old well. In the pitch blackness the boy did not avoid what Pete seemed to have steered clear of by instinct. With a crash that woke the echoes, he blundered headlong into a big pile of

tin buckets and pails which had been placed there that day. A bull running amuck in a tin shop could hardly have made more noise.

"My great aunt alkali, you've done it now!" growled Pete, as the terrific crash sounded close behind him.

"Oh, go on, Pete! Go on, and leave me," cried Jack miserably. "I'll only hamper you. Go on by yourself."

"I'll go with you or not at all," was Pete's firm rejoinder. "Come on, now, hurry. They're bound to have heard that, and they'll be 'round here like so many hornets in a minute."

Pete's prophecy proved correct. Hardly had the clanging, clashing echoes of the avalanche of dislodged tinware died out, before they heard Black Ramon's voice shouting:

"Over there! Over there by the well. Fire at them."

Jack did not know much Spanish, but he could comprehend this.

"Fire away," muttered Pete grimly, as they rapidly wormed their way along among the scrub. "You'll not do us any harm by shooting at the

well, but you'll drill your rotten tinware full of holes."

But the Mexicans having now recovered from their first excitement, turned their thoughts to other ways of getting back the fugitives than by firing into the darkness after them. To the ears of Jack and Pete was soon borne the trample of horses, and the rattle of galloping hoofs, as Black Ramon's men spread out through the darkness looking for them.

"They're going to form a ring," he whispered, as they squirmed their way along; "that's what they're going to do. They know we are without horses or weapons, and that if they only make the ring large enough they're bound to get us."

On and on they crept, so close to the ground that the burning dust, which had a plentiful admixture of alkali in it, filled their eyes and nose. Pete was more or less used to the stuff, having ridden sometimes for days at a time in it behind herds of cattle or horses, but to Jack the smarting sensation in mouth and nostrils was almost unbearable. The stuff fairly choked him.

Suddenly Pete's hand shot out and gripped

Jack's arm with a viselike pressure. Jack interpreted the signal without a word.

"Stop!"

Down they both crouched in the alkali dust among the brush, hardly daring to breathe.

Long before Jack's ears had caught a sound, Pete's quick eye had detected something. He laid his ear to the ground.

"Too dry," he muttered, after holding it there an instant.

Then he drew from his pocket his knife and opened both blades. The larger he thrust into the earth and placed his ear against the smaller bit of steel.

"Just as I thought. Coming this way!" he muttered. "We'll have to lie low and trust to luck."

Presently the trampling that the cowboy's rough-and-ready telegraph had detected became distinctly audible, and against the star-spattered sky Jack saw two black figures on horseback slowly rise up from a hollow. They came into view as slowly as fairies rising to the stage from a trap-door in a theatre.

Neither Pete nor Jack dared to breathe, as the two figures appeared and paused as if undecided which way to go. Suddenly one of them began to speak.

"No sign of 'em in here, amigo. Say ombre, I tell you what—you ride off to the right, and I'll take the left trail. We've covered all the other ground, and that way we're bound to get 'em."

The Mexican grunted something and rode off in the direction the other had indicated.

"It's Jim Cummings, the dern skunk," whispered Coyote Pete to Jack, his indignation at the idea of being hunted by the renegade cowboy getting the better of his prudence.

For one terrible minute Jack thought they had been discovered. Jim Cummings, who had been riding off, stopped his pony abruptly and faced round in the saddle.

"Queer," he said to himself; "thought I heard something. Guess I'll take a look and see if the critters left any trail through hereabouts. I wouldn't trust myself alone with Coyote Pete, but I know he's got no shooting iron, and I reckon

this will fetch down a dozen like him, or the kid with him."

He patted his revolver—a big forty-four—as he spoke, and dismounted. Throwing his pony's reins over his head, in plainsman's fashion, the renegade struck a match and bent down toward the ground. He was looking to see if Jack or Coyote Pete had passed that way.

What happened then came so quickly that afterward, when he tried to tell it, Jack never could get the successive incidents arranged clearly in his own mind. All that was audible was a frightened gasp from the renegade as the glare of a match fell on Coyote Pete's face. Wet with sweat, plastered with dust, and disfigured by righteous anger at the renegade, Pete's countenance was indeed one to inspire terror in the person suddenly lighting upon it.

Before the gasp had died out of Jim Cumming's throat, and before he could utter the cry that somehow refused to come, Coyote Pete, with a spring like that of a maddened cougar, was on him, and bore him earthward with a mighty crash.

"Take that, you coward, you sneak, you traitor!" he snarled vindictively under his breath, as the unfortunate Jim Cummings struggled and his breath came in sharp wheezes. As he spoke, Coyote Pete, temporarily transformed by rage and scorn to a wild beast, savagely hammered Jim Cummings' head against the ground.

He was recalled to himself by Jack, who, after his first moment of startled surprise, realized that unless he interfered Cummings would in all likelihood be killed.

"Pete, Pete, are you mad?" he gasped, seizing the other's arm and staying it, as the furious cow-puncher was about to bring it crashing down into the renegade's face.

"Mad!" repeated Pete, looking up, "well, I guess so. But I'm glad you brought me to my senses, son. I'd hate to have the blood of such a varmint as this on my conscience."

He rose to his feet, still breathing heavily from his furious outburst.

"Phew! but that did me good," he said, rolling the unconscious Cummings over with a contemptuous foot. "I reckon this coyote won't go hunt-

ing his own people with a pack of yellow dogs for a long time to come."

Pete was right, it was many a day before Cummings got over his thrashing, but in the meantime the delay occasioned by Pete's outbreak came near to costing them dear.

A sudden trampling in the darkness behind them made them turn, and they saw dimly the figure of a horseman behind them. The starlight glinted on his rifle barrel as he aimed it at them and covered both the fugitives beyond hope of escape.

"Up your hands!"

The command came from the new arrival in broken, but none the less vigorous and unmistakable English.

CHAPTER XII.

A RIDE FOR THE HILLS.

But instead of complying with the demand, Coyote Pete did a strange thing. He waved his hands above his head and rushed straight at the man with the rifle. As he had expected, the pony the Mexican bestrode was, like most western animals, only half broken. The sight of this sudden figure leaping toward it out of the brush caused it to wheel sharply with a snort of dismay.

So unexpected was the maneuver that the Mexican, no less than his horse, was taken by surprise. His rifle almost slipped from his fingers as he tried to seize the reins and control his pony. When once more he turned, it was to find himself looking into the business-like muzzle of Jim Cummings' pistol, which Pete had quickly jerked from the unconscious man's holster.

"Now, then, amigo," ordered Pete, "get off. Pronto!"

"But, hombre——" began the Mexican.

"Get off!"

Pete accompanied this command by baring his white teeth in such terrifying fashion that the other quickly dismounted.

"Give me his lariat," ordered Pete to Jack, but never for an instant taking his eyes off the Mexican.

Jack, glad of a chance to be of some use, sprang forward. In a trice he detached the Mexican's lariat from his saddle horn and waited Pete's next order.

"Tie him, and tie him good and tight," ordered the cow-puncher. "Don't mind hurting him. These greasers have got a hide as tough as Old Scratch himself."

It did not take Jack long to bind the follower of Black Ramon hand and foot, and then, with a sarcastic apology, Pete tore off a strip of his not overclean shirt, rolled it in a ball, and shoved it into the Mexican's mouth.

"There, he is hog-tied and silenced, with neatness and dispatch," he said. "Now for Cummings, and then we're off."

Cummings was still insensible, and the operation of tying him with his own rawhide, and forcing a gag into his mouth didn't take long.

"I hate to ride without a lariat," said Pete, "but it can't be helped. And anyhow, we've got two good cayuses by as big a stroke of luck as ever a cow-puncher had. You take that plug of the greaser's, Jack. I've got a fancy to this fellow of Cummings', here. And mind, if anybody says a word to us you let me do the talking."

Soon afterward, both, on a further suggestion of Pete's, wrapped in the bound men's serapes—or cloaks,—the two adventurers set forward toward the north.

"Now we're headed for God's country," grunted Pete, as he kept his eyes fixed on the north star, which is the plainsman's as well as the sailor's night guide.

"How can you locate it without a compass?" asked Jack, as Pete informed him how he had located their direction.

"By the outside stars of the Dipper, Jack," said Pete. "The good Lord put 'em there, I reckon, so as white men situated as you and I

are should have no trouble in finding the way to his country. For, you mark my words, Jack, there ain't no God's country south of the border. It all belongs to the other fellow, and they're working for him in double shifts."

The ponies which they now bestrode were fine little animals—quick as cats on their feet and evidently hard as nails, for their coats were as dry to the touch as kindling wood, despite all the excitement they had undergone.

"Feels good to have a horse between your legs again," said Pete, still in a low, cautious voice, for they were by no means out of danger as yet.

"Yes," whispered Jack, "I've heard it said that a cow-puncher without his pony is only half a man."

"I guess maybe you're right," agreed Pete, urging forward his little animal by a dig in the sides.

"Say, Pete," whispered Jack suddenly, as they rode slowly forward under the star-sprinkled heavens, "I do wish we could go back and make a strike for the freedom of the others. It seems kind of mean for us to be safe and sound here,

and leaving them back in the lion's mouth, so to speak."

"Don't worry about that, Jack. By getting over on to good Yankee soil we are doing more to help them than we could in any other way. If we turned back now we might spoil everything, and as to being safe and sound—— Hark!"

Both reined in their ponies and listened intently. From far behind was borne to their ears the distant noise of shouts and cries. Standing on the elevation to which they had now attained, the sounds came through the clear night air with great distinctness.

"They're making a fine hullabaloo," commented Jack. "Do you think they've found Cummings and the other?"

"Don't know. Guess not, though. The sounds seem to be coming from more to the eastward than where we left them; but say, Jack, don't you hear anything else but hollering?"

"Why, yes, I do seem to hear a kind of queer sound; what is it?"

"The very worst sound we could get wind of, Jack—it's bloodhounds."

"Bloodhounds!" gasped Jack, who had read and heard much of the ferocity and tracking ability of the animals. "They will trace us down and tear us to pieces."

"Hum, you've bin readin' Uncle Tom's Cabin, I reckon," sniffed Pete. "No, they won't tear us to pieces, Jack, but what they will do is to round us up and then set up the almightiest yelling and screeching and baying you ever heard. They'll bring the whole hornet's nest down around our ears."

"What are we to do, Pete?" breathed Jack, completely at a loss in the face of this new peril, which seemed doubly hard to bear, coming as it did when escape had seemed certain.

"Dunno. Just ride ahead, I reckon, that's all we can do, and thank our lucky stars it ain't daylight. If only we was a spell farther into the hills, we might strike water, and that would throw them off."

"How would that confuse them?"

"Well, hounds can't track through water. It kills the scent. I'd give several head of beef critters for a sight of a creek right now."

All this time they had been riding ahead, and although it was pitchy dark they could tell that they were rising. Whether they were on a trail or not, they had no means of knowing. That the ground was rough and stony, though, they knew, for the ponies, sure-footed as they were, stumbled incessantly.

"Good thing none of Ramon's men reached out as far as this, or we'd sure be giving ourselves away every time one of these cayuses shakes a foot," grunted Pete.

"I wish it wasn't so black," whispered Jack, who was riding a little in advance. "I can't see a thing ahead. I wonder if—— Oh!"

His pony had suddenly given a wild leap backward, missed its footing, and slid down some sort of a steep bank.

"Jumping gee whilkers, what in blazes!" began Pete, when in just the same way he went sliding forward into space.

Both ponies fetched up, after stumbling several feet down a steep declivity, and the sound that their hoofs made as they did so was one of

the most welcome that the fugitives could have heard.

Splash! splash!

"Water!" exclaimed Pete. "Our blind luck is just naturally holding out."

"Is it a watercourse?" inquired Jack, "or just a hole."

Pete leaned over, holding on by crooking his left foot against the cantle of his saddle.

"It's a creek, and flowing lively, too," he announced, as he held his hand in the water, "and incidentally, as the newspaper fellers say, I'm thirsty."

"So am I," agreed Jack. "Let's have a drink. Besides, we don't know how long it may be before we get another."

"You've the makings of a cow-puncher in you," approved Pete, slipping from his saddle. Side by side the two lay on the brink of the stream and drank till they could drink no more. The water was cool, though tainted with a slightly alkaline taste common to most mountain creeks in that region. Refreshed, they stood up once more and listened. The baying still came in-

cessantly, accompanied by shouts of encouragement from the riders behind the dogs. It was getting unpleasantly near, also.

"Time for us to cut stick," grunted Pete, swinging himself into his saddle once more. Jack did the same.

"Now to fool 'em," chuckled the cow-puncher.

The ponies' noses were turned up stream, and the sure-footed little animals rapidly traversed the slippery rocks and holes of the creek bed.

"These are great little broncs," said Jack with a sigh, "but don't I wish I had Firewater. I wonder if I'll ever see him again?"

"Sure you will, boy," comforted Pete, although in his own heart he had serious doubts of it. Pete knew that a Mexican loves a good pony above all things, and that once having possession of Firewater, Ramon would let him pass out of his hands willingly, seemed unlikely.

Every now and then, as they stumbled forward in the darkness, they paused and listened. The baying had suddenly stopped, and then broke out afresh with renewed vigor. It had a puzzled note in it, too.

"They're stuck for a time," grunted Pete, "but we haven't shaken them off yet. Yip-ee! hear them dogs holler! They've found the place where we entered the water."

"Then we are out of danger?"

"Not yet, boy. We'll not be out of danger till we're over the border and among our own folks. These greasers are no fools, and in a few minutes they'll realize that we've taken to the water, and be along the bank after us."

"But if we turn out here they won't know in which direction we've gone," argued Jack. "Let's leave the creek here and turn north again."

They had been traveling due east through the night, and he waved his hand as he spoke, toward the left bank of the stream.

"Kiddie, you've got horse sense, all right," approved Pete. "I guess that's the best thing for us to do. Anyhow, we've gone as far as we want to in this direction, and it's time to head for home again."

Home—never had the word held so sweet a sound for either of the two imperiled fugitives.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE HERMIT OF THE CANYON.

After some difficulty they found a place in the side of the watercourse up which the ponies could scramble. The little animals were soon once more among the rough, broken ground and stiff scrub brush of the upper foothills. The way was steeper now, and even the inexperienced Jack knew that they must be approaching the mountains themselves. Presently in fact, the darker outlines of the range could be seen dimly against the night, looking at first more like a darker portion of the sky itself than a solid body reared against it.

"Rough going," muttered Pete, "but these little skates are jack rabbits at the work."

"There goes Ramon and his outfit," exclaimed Jack a minute later, when after one of their list-

ening pauses they heard a clattering of hoofs and confused shouts and baying far below them.

"Yep, and I guess he's a worried greaser right now," grinned Pete. "You see he'll be figuring that if we get clear away it won't be long before he has the soldiers after him and his precious bunch."

"The soldiers?" asked Jack, "United States cavalry men? Why it will take a week to get them."

"No, sonny, not United States chaps, more's the pity. A few of our blue breeches would clean out that confabulation in double-quick time. No, the military I refer to are the Mexican troops. If it's a Saint's day or anything, when they get the order to move they won't budge."

"What, they'll refuse duty?"

"Yep. They'll sit around and smoke cigarettes and play dice till they get good and ready to move, that's the kind of soldier men they have over the border."

"Well, why can't some of our fellows get after Ramon?"

"If they could, sonny, the whole question of

trouble on the border would be over and done with. But you see there's some sort of law—international law, they call it—that works all right in Washington, and so the big bugs there figure out it must be all right here. We couldn't send troops into Mexico after those greaser cattle-rustlers any more than they could send after the rascals that get from Tamale land into the States."

"Then it works both ways?"

"That's just the trouble, it don't. All the Mexican rascals get cotched when they cross into the States, but all kinds of rascals, white, black, yellow and red, escape all their troubles by skipping inter Mister Diaz's country."

"That doesn't seem fair."

"Nor does lots of things in this old world, son, but we've got to grin and bear it, I reckon, just as Ramon ull have to do if he don't pick up our trail."

Such progress did the fugitives make that night that by the time their guiding star began to fade in the sky they found themselves in a wild cañon, rock walled, and clothed, in places

where vegetation could find root-hold, with the same fir, madrone and piñon as Grizzly Pass. The rising sun found them still pressing onward. They did not dare to stop, for although they were pretty sure none of the Mexicans would have followed thus far, they were aware that it would be folly to halt till they had put all the miles possible between them and their enemies.

"There's one thing we know now, anyhow," said Pete with some complacency, as they rode on over the rocky ground among the pungent-smelling mountain bay bushes, "and that is that the cañons in these hills split north and south, so that we won't stray that way."

"I read somewhere, too, that you can tell the north because there's more moss on the trunks of the trees on the north side than any other," announced Jack with some pride.

To his chagrin, Pete burst into a laugh.

"That might be all right in Maine, son, for city hunters, but what are you going to do out here where all the water these hills and trees get is needed for something else than moss-making?"

It was about noon, and in that deep gulch the

sun was beating down oppressively, when Jack gave a sudden cry.

"Look, Pete, look—a trail!" he cried.

Sure enough, winding among the brush there was a small trail just wide enough for a horse to travel in. The brush scraped their legs as they rode along it.

"Might as well follow it, I guess," said Pete, after a careful scrutiny. "Only one man been along here, so far as I can see. We're still on the Mex. side, though, so have your shooting iron ready in case we run into trouble."

With every sense alert, they rode on for a mile or more, when suddenly the trail gave an abrupt turn, and they saw before them a small hut fashioned roughly out of logs, stones and brush. From its chimney blue smoke was pouring, scenting the woods about with a pleasant incense.

"Cooking," cried Pete, "and that reminds me that my appetite and my stomach have been fighting like a cat and a dog for the last two hours."

"I could eat something myself," said Jack.

"We haven't had a bite since yesterday noon, you know."

"That's so," assented Pete. "We've been so busy, though, I never noticed it till just now."

"That's queer," said Jack, noting the same curious fact; "neither did I. But I do feel ravenous enough to eat a rhinoceros now."

"Wonder where the boss of this sheebang is?" queried Pete, as on a closer approach no sign of life was apparent about the place.

"Well, he can't be out calling on neighbors," laughed Jack.

"I guess there's no harm in just looking in and taking a peep."

"Better be careful," said Jack. "I've heard that these mountain hermits are a queer lot, and this one might shoot us."

"Hi-yi!" yelled Pete suddenly, "look at that!"

Jack looked, and saw that projecting through a cranny in the stone wall was the rusty muzzle of a rifle, seemingly of big caliber.

There was something uncanny in the sight of this sinister weapon, aimed dead at them, with apparently no human hand to guide it.

"Better get out of range, son," warned Pete, reining over his pony; "that feller might be nervous on the trigger."

But as they swung to one side of the trail the ominous rifle barrel followed, still keeping them covered.

"Confound the fellow!" burst out Jack, hardly knowing whether to be amused or angry, "what does he mean?"

"Business, apparently," grunted Pete dryly.

"Hi, amigo!" the cow-puncher suddenly shouted.

A rude query in Spanish came back from inside the hut.

"Wants to know who we are," he said in an aside to Jack. Then to the hermit:

"We are hunters, and lost in the mountains. Can we get food and water and some fodder for the ponies?"

An almost unintelligible answer came back.

"Wants us to lay down our rifles," translated Pete. "What do you say?"

"I guess we'll have to," said Jack. "I'm so

hungry that I feel as if I'd risk anything for a square meal."

"That's the way I feel," agreed Pete. "The ponies, too, are pretty well played out. Reckon we'd better do as he says."

Accordingly, the rifles were dropped on the ground at the ponies' sides, and presently the rusted rifle barrel was withdrawn.

"What now?" wondered Jack.

The solitary cañon-dweller presently appeared at the door of his hut. He was an old man in ragged garments, so tattered as to here and there expose his flesh. His face was wrinkled till it resembled a monkey's more than a human being's. The lower half of his countenance was completely covered by a huge matted growth of white beard. He still kept his aged rifle in his hand as he faced his visitors, as if he was afraid of some treachery.

"Better tell him that we don't mean him any harm," suggested Jack.

Pete translated the boy's remark to the hermit, who chattered rapidly in Mexican in response.

While he was talking Jack eyed the queer old man.

"I believe he is crazy," he said to himself. The hermit's beady eyes had a malevolent glare in them, and when they fell on him Jack felt a creepy sort of sensation.

"I don't half like the idea of going into that old fellow's hut," he told himself, "but I guess there's no help for it."

Pete, however, it seemed, felt no such apprehensions, for he was now leading the two ponies round to a small shelter in the face of the mountain which served the old man as a stable. A disreputable-looking "clay-bank" mule, with only one ear and a half, was standing in it disconsolately flopping her whole organ of hearing.

"He don't look very good, but I guess he's all right," said Pete in a low tone, in response to Jack's whispered comment on the old hermit.

Inside the hut they found a smoky sort of stew cooking in a big iron pot. The old Mexican explained that the meat in it was deer flesh, and the vegetables, which were corn, tomatoes, and peppers, came from a small patch he cultivated

behind his lonely hut. Although they had to eat with one spoon out of the great pot itself, neither of the travelers was in a critical or fastidious mood, and they made a hearty meal.

The food disposed of, Pete, to his huge delight, discovered that the old man had some home-grown tobacco, and having borrowed a black pipe from him, he fell to smoking. All this time Jack was nervous and apprehensive. Once or twice he had caught the ragged old fellow's beady eyes fixed on him, with their strange burning look. His impression that the lonely hut-dweller was insane grew upon him. But Pete seemed quite at his ease. Suddenly the cow-puncher said:

"I'm as sleepy as the Old Scratch, Jack. What do you say if we take forty winks?"

"Better be getting on, Pete; we can sleep later," warned Jack with a wink in the direction of the old man, to show he mistrusted him.

"Ho-ho-ho-hum!" yawned the cow-puncher. "We didn't get enough sleep for a cat last night. Anyhow, the ponies have got to rest up a bit."

As he spoke he threw himself at full length on a rough couch, covered with skins, at one end

of the hut, and which apparently served the old hermit for a bed.

Before Jack could remonstrate, Pete, with the quick adaptability of the plainsman, was off in a deep slumber, snoring till the roof of the place shook.

"Well, there's no use waking him if he's as sleepy as all that," thought Jack, who, to tell the truth, was feeling very drowsy himself.

After making a scanty meal, the old man with the shifty eyes shouldered a hoe, and, mumbling something, made off. Jack watched him and saw that he took his way up the hillside to his garden where he set to work among the cornstalks.

The occupation seemed so harmless that Jack felt half ashamed of his suspicions. Nevertheless, he was determined to keep a keen lookout. Seating himself in a big chair, roughly fashioned out of logs, with a big bearskin spread over it, the boy prepared to keep his vigil. But alas! for the best determination of man and boy. It grew very still in the hut. Far up on the hillside came the monotonous tap-tap of the old man's hoe. Insects buzzed drowsily in the warm afternoon

air. The whole world seemed in a conspiracy to put the tired boy to sleep.

Once Jack caught himself nodding, and awoke with an angry start at his own neglectfulness. A second time the same thing occurred, but this time his start was not quite so abrupt. Presently his deep regular breathing was added to the sonorous snores of Coyote Pete.

Not long afterward, the worker in the corn-patch dropped his hoe and started down the hillside toward the hut. A malevolent smile flitted across his apelike features as he heard Pete's snores. Approaching the hut from the back, the hermit cautiously raised himself, till his wild face was peering into a small, unglazed window. His grin grew wider as he noted Jack's slumber-stilled form. Then he dropped from the window and walked rapidly away.

How much later it was that Jack awakened he did not know. All that he was aware of was that the hut seemed singularly dark, and that the fire on the hermit's hearth was out. The cause of the darkness soon became apparent. The door of the place was shut.

Jack hastened across the floor to open it. To his consternation, it resisted his stoutest efforts. It had been barred on the outside. The window through which the hermit had peered was little more than a hole, and too small to permit egress of either his own or Pete's body.

Hastily the boy awoke Pete, who at once began blaming himself bitterly for being the cause of the catastrophe. There was small doubt in the minds of either that the old hermit had locked them in; though for what purpose they could not, at the moment, imagine.

"We'll have to break the door down," said Pete as he hastily rose, brushing the sleep out of his eyes.

He gave the door a terrific shake, but it did not tremble. It was stronger than they had supposed. Pete, mustering every ounce of strength in his muscular body, crouched himself half across the room, and then with a terrific rush tried to break it down with his shoulder.

Still it did not budge.

For the second time in twenty-four hours the fugitives were prisoners.

CHAPTER XIV.

TRAVELS WITH A MULE.

"Well, was I right?"

"Oh, say, don't rub it in, Jack. Of course you were. I was a fool to have gone to sleep, but——"

"Never mind reproaching yourself now, Pete," said Jack soberly. "The thing to do is to get out of here as quick as possible."

"Yes, we've no time to lose," said Pete, a serious look coming over his ordinarily cheerful countenance.

Jack caught a more serious meaning underlying the words than they seemed to hold in themselves.

"I should say so," he rejoined. "We've got to catch that old ruffian and give him the thrashing of his life. The idea of shutting us in here. I thought he was crazy, and now I know it."

"Not so crazy as you think, Jack," replied Pete gravely. "I'm afraid he's got more sense than we gave him credit for, and that right now we are in more serious danger than at any time since we escaped."

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind now. I don't want to scare you to death without there being any necessity for it. What I want to impress on you is that there is no time to lose."

"Of course, I appreciate that," rejoined Jack, not quite making out what Pete meant, but thinking it wiser to abstain from asking questions at the moment, "but how are we to get out?"

"Dunno right now," said Pete, scratching his head abstractedly.

"I have it," cried Jack suddenly. "We'll burn the door down."

"What about matches?"

"There are still some embers on the hearth there, and a pile of brush beside it. I'm sure we can do it."

"Well, let's get to work, then," said Pete, who seemed strangely ill at ease.

A goodly pile of brush was soon piled against the rough door and ignited by means of taking an ember from the fire and blowing on it till it burst into flame. Up roared the flames, the timber fire crackling against the stone roof and filling the hut with a choking smoke. Luckily, most of this escaped by the window, or they might have run a good chance of being suffocated.

"Say, it'll take a year to burn through the door at this rate," choked out Jack, after fifteen minutes or so of this.

"It would if we were going to burn through it, but we ain't," chuckled Pete. "Let the fire burn down now—or, better still, there's some water in that jar; just throw it over the blaze."

This being done, the fire soon died out, and then Pete, wresting one of the heavy loose stones from the hearth, battered with all his might against the charred wood. It took a long time, but at last a chink of daylight appeared.

"Hooray!" shouted Jack, as they attacked it with a piece of iron found near the cooking-hearth. Soon quite a hole appeared, and Pete, reaching through, encountered a heavy wooden

bar leaned against the door from the outside, placed to hold it firmly closed. It was the work of but a few seconds to dislodge this and emerge into the open air.

Their work, however, had taken so much time that it was dusk when they stepped out of the door. Without a word, Pete, as if he had gone suddenly mad, darted off toward the old hermit's stable. He emerged in a second with an angry cry on his lips.

"Just as I thought," he exclaimed, "they're gone!"

"Gone!"

"Yes, the ponies and our rifles."

"Great Scott, what will we do?"

"Get away from here as soon as possible. If I don't miss my guess, that leathery-skinned old squeedink has recognized those ponies and started back to Black Ramon with them."

"Good gracious, that means——"

"That we'll have the whole boiling of them round us if we don't skeedaddle out of here pretty jerky. We lost a lot of valuable time getting that door down."

"But we've no ponies; how are we to travel on foot and keep ahead of them?"

"Well, there's that old one-and-a-half-eared mule out there. I reckon we won't be busting no code of ethics by borrrering her. I'll get a saddle on her, and you just fill your pockets with whatever you can find in the way of grub, then we'll start."

In a few minutes all was ready, and the old mule, with a ragged saddle on her angular back, stood waiting with drooping head. Pete swung himself into the saddle, and Jack, being lighter, leaped up behind, holding on to the cantle.

"All right, conductor. Ring the bell and we'll start this here trolley," grinned Pete, digging his feet into the old mule's ribs. She started off at a gait surprising in such a disreputable-looking animal.

"Well, we've got a start they never calculated on us getting," grunted Pete as they loped along. "If only our luck holds to the end, we'll beat them out yet."

The old mule plunged upward along the cañon, clambering over the rough ground with remark-

able agility. One of the first things that Pete had taken care to do was to leave the trail in a rocky spot, where no telltale hoofmarks would show, and his course was now along the bottom of the gorge, where a small watercourse trickled.

"Well, we won't want for water, anyhow," he observed, with some satisfaction.

It grew dark rapidly, and nightfall found them in a wild part of the gorge with the main crests of the range reared forbiddingly above them. So far there had been no sign of pursuit, and both fugitives were beginning to hope that they had got clear away, when from far down the cañon they heard cries and shouts, and, looking back, saw a bright glare of light.

"Well, there they are," grinned Pete, "in a fine way of taking, I guess, over the fire."

"The fire," echoed the boy, puzzled; "is that what the glare is?"

"Yep," snorted Pete, "I reckoned we'd have to pay that old scallawag out some way, so I just scattered a few hot embers about his hut before we vamoosed. I reckon by the looks of things

they're catching up. Guess he's sorry he left us now."

"Pete, you're incorrigible," exclaimed Jack, not knowing whether to laugh or be angry at the cow-puncher's wanton act. True, it was wrong to burn down the old hermit's hut, but still the lone dweller of the cañon had betrayed their trust by an act of base treachery.

"I guess the books are about balanced," said Jack to himself.

Aloud he asked:

"Do you think they'll come on after us to-night, Pete?"

"Reckon not," rejoined the cow-puncher; "if they do, 'twon't do them no good. We've killed out the trail in this watercourse, and even if they have the dogs they couldn't pick us up. Wisht we had a couple of good rifles. We could lay up there on the hillside as snug as you please and pick 'em out as we chose."

It soon became manifest that they could not travel much farther that night. Not only was the old mule giving signs of fatigue, but it was so dark that, as Pete said, they "ran a chance of

breaking their necks any minute." They were now high on the eastern slope of the cañon, and a tumble down its steep sides might have had disastrous results. They therefore decided to camp where they were.

Making camp was a simple matter with their scant paraphernalia. The old saddle had a coil of rope attached to its horn, and this cord was made fast to the old mule's neck. Neither of the campers was thirsty, so after eating some of the provisions Jack had hastily stuffed in his pocket, and which consisted mostly of a pasty, sticky corn paste, Pete made their bed.

Rolled in the ragged saddle blanket, with the saddle for pillow, and the stars above them, the wanderers slept as peacefully as if in their beds at home, although their couch was a rocky one. Before turning in, Pete took the precaution of wrapping the old mule's rope around his wrist, so that in the event of a surprise during the night she would give the alarm by tugging on it.

"Isn't she liable to start off home without ceremony?" asked Jack as he observed this.

"Not she," rejoined Pete wisely; "she's too tired to move a step."

All of which goes to show, as we shall see later, that it takes a wise cow-puncher to know a mule.

It was about midnight that Jack was awakened by a most unearthly yell. He sprang to his feet, with every nerve in his body tingling, and the first thing he observed was that Pete was missing. The cause of absence was not long in doubt. A sudden fit of homesickness had seized the old one-eared mule in the night, and she had started without delay for the hermit's hut, dragging with her the luckless Pete. The cow-puncher's yells filled the cañon.

Small wonder was it that he cried out in anguish, for the side of the hill down which the old mule was loping was as steep as the side of a house, and plentifully bestrewn with rocks, intergrown with rough scraggly brush. Jack was fully dressed, just as he had lain down, and he leaped off into the darkness in the direction in which Pete's hideous yells and the clattering of the old mule's hoofs proclaimed them to be. But before he reached them, the abrupt descent of the

mountain by Pete had ceased. The old mule had been halted in midcareer by the rope becoming entangled in a small, low-growing piñon, and she had been checked as effectively as if a hand had been laid on the rope.

"Here, for goodness sake, get me cut loose from this she fiend incarnate," begged Pete, as he heard Jack coming toward him.

"Well, do make less noise, then," said Jack, who could hardly keep from laughing at Pete's doleful tones.

"Noise," groaned Pete; "it's a wonder I'm not making the all-sorrowfulest caterwauling you ever heard. If there's a sound bit of skin on my poor carcass, I'll give you a five-dollar gold piece for it, and no restrictions as to size, either. Ouch!"

He gave a painful exclamation as he rose to his feet.

"Consarn that mule," he grumbled, "I'm going to get me a good thick club, and her and me will argue this thing out. Look at that, will you, for pure cussedness."

No wonder the bruised and battered Pete was

indignant. The runaway mule stood only a few paces from them, unconcernedly cropping some sort of prickly bush, which no animal but a mule would have had the courage to tackle.

"Mule's ain't human, as I've often observed," grunted Pete, in intense disgust; "they're a mixture of combustibles, hide and devilment, with a dash of red fire thrown in."

"Well, why did you tie the rope round your wrist, then?" asked Jack, untangling the tether, and starting to lead the mule back.

"Don't ask me any questions," roared Pete, rubbing himself affectionately, "or if you do, ask me why I was ever a consarned, peskyfied, locoed idjut enough to cross that bridge."

A sudden disturbance in the brush below them caused them to start and listen intently.

The noise sounded like several animals of some sort making a kind of stampede through the brush.

"The Mexicans!" was the first thought that flashed through Jack's mind. But the next instant he knew it was impossible that it could be they.

"Those are no Mexicans, boy," whispered Pete.

"What was it, then?"

"Hold on, thar, or I'll shoot," unwisely yelled Pete. Unwisely, because they, neither of them, had a weapon.

In reply a bullet sang past his ear, fired, judging by the momentary flash, from the direction of the trampling animals.

"Waal, what do you know about that?" grunted Pete amazedly. "This valley must be full of enemies of our'n."

"Better not do any more shouting," warned Jack.

"No, I reckon not. Wow! I heard the bees sing that time, all right."

"What do you suppose it could have been? Not Mexicans, certainly."

"Nope. At least I don't think so. Maybe Injuns."

"Indians!"

"Yes, every once in a while they stampede off the reservation and roam around promiscuous. But anyhow, whatever it was, or whoever it is,

he's more scairt of us than we are of him. Hark!"

There was a mighty clattering of dislodged stones and rustling of brush coming out of the darkness, and diminishing in loudness every minute.

"Git thar, Fox! You ornery son of a side-winding rattler!" they heard an angry voice grunt under its breath, from the direction of the retreat.

"A white man, by Jee-hos-o-phat!" exclaimed Pete, his face lighting up. "Now what in thunder is he doing up here?"

CHAPTER XV.

A GATEWAY TO FREEDOM.

It was not for some time after the abrupt removal of Pete and Jack Merrill that any one of the little party in the old church spoke. Then it was the professor who broke the silence.

"I trust that no harm is meant to our young friend and his breezy companion," he said.

"Harm!" broke out Ralph indignantly, "you seem to take it easy enough. I—oh, well, I beg your pardon, professor, I guess this has got on my nerves. I didn't mean to be so short. But I do wish there was something we could do. Sitting here like this and not knowing what is going to happen is maddening."

"No use letting it get on your nerves, Ralph," counseled the quiet and deliberate Walt Phelps, "worriting about it isn't going to help any"

The professor got up and paced about the old

chapel, examining its walls with care. In one or two places were the remnants of old paintings, and these he examined with great interest.

"If we should ever get away from here I think that I should have some interesting discoveries to report to the Hispanic Society," he remarked amiably.

Walt Phelps nodded. The most interesting discovery he could have made at that moment would have been a door leading into the open air and a good horse standing outside it.

At noon a Mexican entered with their dinner, a similar meal to that which we have already seen served to the prisoners in the tower. Few words were spoken over the meal. Their hearts were too heavy for that. The uncertainty as to what was to be their ultimate fate was almost maddening. In addition, they had to bear the suspense of speculation over the destiny of Jack Merrill and Coyote Pete. Without the broncho buster's cheerful face and whimsical manner to cheer them the castaways were indeed in a gloomy condition.

About the middle of the afternoon they re-

ceived another visit from Black Ramon. This time he brought paper and some ink. The paper was some odd sheets, half torn and very dirty, which looked as if they might have been ripped from an old blank book. The ink was a faded, rusty colored composition. Evidently, writing materials were things for which the cattle rustlers had little use.

In a few brief words, spoken with brutal incisiveness, Black Ramon informed Ralph that his offer still held good. The boy had till the next day to make up his mind to write the letter to his father, demanding the payment of the ransom. A messenger would convey it to the nearest railroad station as soon as it was written. It was for this purpose that the ink and writing materials had been brought. As Jack had feared, the Mexican was going to work upon Ralph's sensitive nature by every means in his power, and as a step toward that end he had removed Jack and the cheerful cow-puncher.

"I've half a mind to write the letter and have it over with," said Ralph, as the door closed and they were once more alone.

"Don't you do it," said Walt Phelps decisively. "I've heard of fellows in a worse scrape than ours getting out of it all right. What's the use of your alarming your folks? After all, it may only be a bluff on the part of Black Ramon."

"I agree with our young Western friend," put in the professor, "this Mexican would hardly dare to commit any offense against the laws, and I firmly believe that if we show ourselves to be determined to resist his will, that he will ultimately let us go."

Walt Phelps had other ideas about the Mexican's character. The Western boy knew the man by reputation, and the general character of the wild outlaws who make their homes along the border. He said nothing, however, wisely thinking it best to let the professor encourage Ralph all he could.

As the afternoon waned away, therefore, the paper still lay scattered in the same spot on the floor where the leader of the cattle rustlers had placed it. By and by, a little ray of sunshine shot in through the window as the sun grew toward the west, and illumined the interior of the

old chapel with a cheerful radiance. The rays played, as if in mockery of their captivity, upon the old sheets of paper, on which the thin, blue lines with which they had been ruled when they were new, were still visible.

"Wonder where Ramon picked up that paper," mused Ralph idly. "It reminds me of our exercise books at school. Looks like it might have been torn out of one of them, too. Heigh ho, I wish I was back at old Stonefell again. Don't you, professor?"

"Eh—oh!" gasped the professor, coming out of a brown study in which he had had his eyes fixed abstractedly on the paper, "yes, yes, of course. But, young man, your eyes are better than mine, and I want to ask you a question—do you notice anything on that paper?"

"Why, yes, a few marks; looks like dirt," said Ralph carelessly. "The sunlight shows them up. Nice sort of correspondence paper." He laughed mirthlessly.

"No, but," insisted the professor, "it looks to me as if characters of some kind were inscribed on them and——"

Ralph had suddenly risen and snatched up one of the sheets. A closer scrutiny had shown him that the papers were indeed covered with some sort of writing which they had not noticed before.

"You're right, professor," he exclaimed, "they are written on. See! the marks are getting clearer. But—but why didn't we see any writing before."

"Because," exclaimed the professor, "the papers have been written on with invisible fluid of some kind. Their exposure to the warm rays of the sun has brought out the writing."

"It's getting clearer," said Ralph, eagerly perusing the sheet he held. "I can't quite make it out yet, though."

He exposed the sheet he held to the sunlight, while Walt Phelps leaned interestedly over his shoulder.

"Why-why," the boy stuttered, "it's something about this church. Look here, I can see the 'Church of St. Gabriel, the old mission,' as plain as anything, and-and, why, professor," shouted the boy, half wild with excitement, "I believe that

this paper, by some wonderful chance, may be the means of getting us out of here."

"Let me see," demanded the professor, taking the paper from the boy's trembling hands. Sure enough, it was covered with characters written closely, and seemingly hastily.

"'This record, made the seventeenth day of August, 1909,'" he read out, "'is to be kept in case of accidents. The secret passage lies four squares from the fifth square from the last window on the right hand side toward the altar. The old altar rail pulls back, exposing the trapdoor. Treasure in passage, one hundred paces from north of tunnel in wall, to right.' Give me that other page, Ralph, quick!"

The professor's voice shook strangely, and his dim eyes shone behind his spectacles. Rapidly he warmed the page Ralph handed him in the sunlight, and more writing leaped into view.

"'Written by me with onion juice on above date. Jim Hicks, prospector, formerly of Preston Hollow, N. Y. State. This to be an instrument for my heirs, if any, and if this is ever

found.' And here is something that seems to be a postscript," gasped the professor, amazedly.

" 'Will have to leave this in church and trust to luck. Place not deserted as I had thought, but in possession of Mexicans. If chance should bring this to an American's notice, let them search out Jim Hicks, the prospector, rightful owner of treasure by right of discovery, and legacy of Don Manuel Serro y Fornero, the last descendant of the old monk, Brother Hilarito.' "

"Good gracious, does that mean this church?" breathed Walt Phelps, his eyes as round as two marbles.

"Evidently," said the professor, who seemed strangely excited, "as nearly as I can make out, Jim Hicks was, or is, a miner or prospector who in some way was willed this missing treasure, whatever it is, by the last heir of one of the old monks who formerly lived in the mission. He must have come here to dig up the treasure and been surprised by the Mexicans. Fearing discovery when he would have been searched, he wrote this record in some old book he had with him and then stuffed it in a recess in the wall or other hid-

ing place. In some way the Mexicans found it, and not knowing what it was tore some leaves out, which providentially happened to be these, and gave them to Ralph to write his last message on."

"I guess you must be right, professor," agreed Ralph, "I've often heard that the old monks, when their Indians were giving trouble, hid their treasure in secret places. And this Brother Hila—whatever his name was—must have been the last survivor of the monastery. He willed the secret to his heirs, who, in turn, gave it to this old miner, Jim Hicks."

"This is the strangest thing I ever heard of," exclaimed Walt Phelps, "but now that we have found it, what good does it do us?"

"Why, why," blurted out Ralph, "don't you see, Walt, what the invisible writing has done? It has pointed out to us a way to escape."

"How?" asked the blunt Walt.

"How—why, through the tunnel."

"Yes, if this is the right church, and if the tunnel has an exit at the other end," rejoined the practical Walt. "I don't want to throw cold water

on your hopes, Ralph, but this looks to me as if it might be a trick of Black Ramon's."

"I hardly think so," said the professor. "At any rate, it is worth trying. We will make a test as soon as possible."

They did not dare, however, to try to test the secret of the old book till they could be sure they were not watched from without by one of Ramon's spies. Not till after dusk did they feel perfectly secure from observation. Then, with the professor leading, they sought out in the tessellated floor the designated square. It was easily found, and following the directions which had been memorized, for, of course, the invisible writing had disappeared with the fading of the warmth that brought it into being, the eager seekers went over the prescribed ground.

There was a moment of painful suspense as the professor laid hold of a moldering altar rail, followed by a moan of disappointment.

The rail did not yield. It was anchored solidly in its base.

"Sold!" ejaculated Ralph. Walt Phelps did not speak, but his disappointment was keen.

The professor said nothing, but thought deeply for a few minutes. Then he spoke.

"I have it," he exclaimed suddenly, "it's we that have been wrong, and not the book."

"What do you mean?" asked Ralph, "we followed directions. I memorized them carefully myself."

"Yes, my boy, we did, but if you recollect the book said nothing about the color of the squares. We counted on the black ones, assuming that to be correct. Now might it not just as well have been the white ones that the directions meant?"

"That's so," agreed Ralph eagerly, with new hope; let's try it that way."

"We'll have to be quick. It will be dark as pitch in a few minutes," said Walt.

Once more the three bent over the floor and counted carefully, this time using the white tiles as counters. Their enumeration brought them to another old brass rail, standing upright in what had once been the chancel of the old church.

Not one of that party drew a breath, as in the dying light the professor laid his hand on the upright pillar and pulled.



From the mouth of the dark pit a fetid, foul-smelling air rushed upward.

"Fooled again," burst out Ralph; but suddenly the professor, who had put his utmost strength into the task, went toppling backward, waving his arms like a scarecrow in a high gale. He fell on the marble floor with a crash, but was up again like a jack-in-the-box.

"Hooray! hooray! the old miner's writing was true!" burst out Ralph.

"Hush!" exclaimed Walt, "you'll have Ramon and his men in here in a moment."

As he spoke there came a sudden trampling of feet outside and shouts echoed.

"They've found us out!" gasped Ralph, with blanched cheeks.

"No, they're running past the door," exclaimed Walt. "Listen, something else is the matter."

"What can it be?" wondered Jack.

"No time for speculation now, my boy," warned the professor, who had recovered himself. "It's now or never. Are we going to chance the secret tunnel?"

"Yes," chorused both boys, gazing without hesitation into the black square which the swinging back of the rail had revealed. From the mouth

of the dark pit a fetid, foul-smelling air rushed upward. It was the breath of the dead centuries.

"One moment," said the professor, staying Ralph as he was about to plunge forward undismayed into the abyss; "let some of that deadly gas out."

In apprehension of momentary discovery, the adventurers waited, starting at every sound. Outside the disturbance still went on. Feet could be heard rushing hither and thither. What could be happening?

"Now!" said the professor, after a few breathless minutes had passed.

Led by Ralph, they plunged downward, their feet encountering a flight of steps.

As they vanished into the unknown, the trapdoor, actuated by some hidden machinery, which must have acted as their weight came on the long disused steps, swung silently back into place.

At the same instant there were several loud shouts from without, followed by a fusillade of rifles.

The escape of Jack and Pete from the tower had just been discovered, and while the ranch boy

and the cow-puncher were surrounded by the perils through which we have followed them, the other members of the beleaguered party made their way forward into a blackness so utter as to feel almost solid.

CHAPTER XVI.

SHORT RATIONS.

As soon as it grew daylight next morning the two fugitives, Jack Merrill and Coyote Pete, not to forget the one-eared mule, from the effects of whose stampede Pete was still limping, made a careful reconnaissance. From their lofty perch on a ledge of rock far up the cañon they could see behind them a thin thread of distant blue smoke, which still marked the scene of the destruction of the treacherous old hermit's hut.

A few bluejays hopped about here and there, eying the intruders inquisitively, a badger rushed grunting and grumbling through some nearby scrub. Otherwise the cañon, under a blinding blue sky, was still as a desert noon.

"Wa'al, all's quiet along the Potomac from the looks of things," commented Pete, "and now let's get down to the creek, and I'll wash off some of

the dirt that one-eared Maud there plastered me with last night, and then we'll hit up that pocket chuck-wagon of yours."

"And after that?" asked Jack.

"Why, then, we'll keep right on going. Let's see, it was to-day that you was to have written home for money, wasn't it?"

"Yes," said Jack, with a sigh, thinking of Ralph, who, if he had only known it, was at that moment beyond Back Ramon's reach.

"Wa'al, now, if that Easterner can only stick out, we'll win home yet," gritted out Pete, "and be back with help by day after to-morrow."

"Now, then, you one-eared, cock-eyed imp of Satan, if you want a morning drink quit pulling back on that halter and come down to the creek," went on the cow-puncher, addressing the mule, which by common consent had been christened Maud.

The mule flopped her one ear wisely at Pete, and docilely allowed herself to be led to water. Both travelers drank and laved themselves, and then seated on a rock at the edge of the water-

course made a meal off the remnants of Jack's stock.

"Last of the grub, eh?" inquired Pete, as the final morsels vanished.

Jack nodded.

"Well, we'll have to tighten our belts a few notches then, I reckon," was all Pete said. It took more than the prospect of a little hunger ahead to alarm the old plainsman.

All at once his eyes fell on an object lying some distance up the creek. It reposed on the flat top of a rock and seemed to be a shallow metal basin of some sort.

"Hello!" exclaimed Pete, as he sighted it, "there's a clew to our neighbor of last night—the one who dug out so unsociable when Maud began cutting up."

"Cutting you up, I guess you mean," laughed Jack, gazing at Pete's scratched countenance, and a further facial decoration he carried in the shape of a big goose egg over one eye.

"Hum, I guess my style of beauty has been considerably damaged," grinned Pete, "and look

at that one-eared demon will you, grinning at us as if she enjoyed it."

They both had to burst out laughing, forgetting their other troubles at the queer sidelong glance Maud bestowed on them. It was as if she said:

"Didn't I have a lark last night?"

"Say, Jack," said Pete suddenly, after an interval of looking about to see if any chance crumbs had been overlooked, "I'm going to have a look at that thing on the rock up there. It may give us a clew to our friend who lit out so unpremeditated."

"That washbowl, you mean?" asked Jack.

"Well, it ain't exactly a wash bowl. It's what prospectors use to wash out gold in. They take a handful of mud and some water from any creek they think looks good, and then they wash it about. Of course, the gold, being heaviest, sinks to the bottom and stays there after all the other stuff has been washed away."

An examination of the basin showed that it was an old one and much battered. On one side

it bore scratched deep in its surface the initials J. H.

"Feller had quite a camp here," said Pete, looking about him. "Funny we didn't sight him when we first came up. Must have had three ponies, two to pack and one to ride."

"How can you tell that?" asked the boy.

"S'prised at you, a Western kid, asking such a question," grinned Pete, who was in high good spirits since they had apparently thrown off the Mexicans; "look at those hoofs."

"That's right," said Jack, after a short scrutiny, "there's one with only half a shoe on the off forefoot, one unshod on the hind hoofs——"

"That's one of the packers," put in Pete.

"And another the same way. Another packer," concluded Jack.

"You'll make a vaquero yet," approved Pete, "but come on, it's time for us to be up and getting. I only wish we hadn't scared J. H., whoever he is, out of ten years' growth, and we'd have been in the way of getting a hot breakfast."

"You wouldn't have wanted to have lighted a

fire," cried Jack; "wouldn't the Mexicans have seen the smoke?"

"Wa'al, I guess you're right, kiddo," said Pete; "cold victuals are safe victuals in a fix like ours. Just the same, a slapjack and some frizzled bacon, with a cup of hot coffee, would appeal to yours truly right now."

"Don't talk of such things," laughed Jack; "we may be eating piñon leaves by sundown."

"And that's no childish dream," agreed Pete. "Now, let's saddle up Maud and be on our way."

A few minutes later, with Pete's heels drumming a tattoo on her bony sides, Maud was once more ambling over the trail, her one ear moving backward and forward as if some sort of clockwork contrivance was in it.

"Lot of waste of power there," observed the practical Pete. "Hitch that ear to a sewing machine or a corn sheller and you'd have any motor ever built beat a mile."

By a sort of mutual but unspoken agreement, neither of the two mentioned eating when the sun, by its height in the sky, showed that it was noon. Without a word, though, Jack, from his

position behind the cattle, tightened up his belt a notch. Short rations were beginning to tell on him. Pete, however, seemed cheerful enough. He even hummed from time to time a few lines of that endless cow-puncher's song which begins:

"Lie quietly now cattle;
And please do not rattle;
Or else we will drill you
As sure as you're born."

Such good progress did they make, notwithstanding Maud's deliberate method of procedure, that by mid-afternoon they found themselves almost at the summit of the range, and in a narrow gorge formed by the closing in of the walls of the cañon. They had been following a sort of trail, which had once—so Pete guessed—been an Indian way. It was, however, overgrown almost continuously with brush, and they had been compelled to turn out a dozen times in every hundred yards. Now suddenly the path came to a stop altogether at a spot where, for a distance of twenty feet or more, the side of the cañon had slipped down. Nothing but a smooth shaly wall, impossible even for Maud's goatlike feet to attempt, lay

between them and the resumption of the trail on the opposite side.

"Have to go around," decided Jack, who had dismounted and was surveying the break in the road.

"That means going back three miles at least," grumbled Pete. "Consarn the luck."

"Well, we can't go ahead."

"There's no such word as can't when you've gotter, son," rejoined Pete, gazing about him, while Maud philosophically cropped some patch grass that grew on the steep side of the trail.

"Let's see," mused Pete. "No, there wouldn't be no sense in trying to climb around it. Even this one-eared jackrabbit couldn't make it. Could you, Maud?"

The one ear shook vigorously.

"No, she's made up her mind she couldn't, and that ends it. Marry an old maid, argue with a school teacher, reason with a rattlesnake, but never try to persuade a mule of the error of her ways," said Pete solemnly.

"There's that old dead tree up there," said Jack suddenly, pointing to the steep shaly bank, where

a big dead pine lay precariously balanced where the last washout that had destroyed the trail had left it.

"Well, what of it?"

"Why, it's long enough to bridge the gap and broad enough for Maud to get across on if we lead her."

"And if she'll go," said Pete. "Just the same I think your idea's a good one, Jack."

"Well, we can try it, anyhow. It wouldn't take more than a shove to dislodge that trunk, and the way it lies it ought to roll so that its two ends will catch on each end of the trail and connect them."

"By Jee-hos-o-phat, I think it'll work!" exclaimed Pete, warming up to the idea.

As he spoke he got off the mule, who for the last five minutes had had her one good ear and the stump of the other cocked forward, listening intently. Her nostrils and eyes were distended, and as Pete's feet touched the ground she gave a wild scramble in an attempt to climb the bank.

"Whoa, whoa, Maud! what's the matter with you, you one-eared locomotive on four legs," growled Pete.

"She's scared at something!" said Jack, with a worried look, gazing nervously about him.

"Yep, that's right. Wonder what it is."

"Ph-r-r-r-r!"

Maud snorted and plunged about furiously.

"Well, it ain't Mexicans, that's a cinch, for the wind is blowing up the trail," mused Pete, "and whatever she smells is coming down. Well, no use worrying about it. The sooner we get busy and get that log across, the sooner we'll be on our way. I'll just hitch old Maud to this tree, and then we'll get to work."

Maud, still prancing and snorting alarmedly, was tied to the tree in a few seconds. The two adventurers, bracing themselves at every step, started to climb up the shale toward the dead tree, which they wished to roll down the incline to connect the two ends of the broken trail.

"Now, I'll take that far end and you take this, and when I say so, we both shove, see?" said Pete. After some difficulty on the slippery foot-

hold the shale afforded, they reached the log, which was nothing more or less than a huge pine trunk, sixty feet or more in length. Had it not been for the manner in which it had been caught on the pinnacle of two rocks at either end, they could not have hoped to move it. Balanced as it was, however, a touch set it rocking.

"Ready?" hailed Pete, after he had scrambled to his end of the log. He laid his hands on the fallen trunk and braced his feet and muscles for a mighty heave.

"All right!" hailed Jack, doing the same, when suddenly his expression of energy froze on his face, and he grew pale under his tan.

"Oh, Pete! oh!" screamed the boy, "look behind you!"

Pete, who stood with his back toward the upper end of the cañon, faced around from his grip on the timber. As he did so he echoed Jack's cry of horror.

Standing at the opposite edge of the broken trail—not twenty feet from him—was a huge, gaunt grizzly.

As it gazed upon the prey on which it had



Standing at the opposite edge of the broken trail—not twenty feet from him—was a huge gaunt grizzly.

lumbered so unexpectedly, the horrible brute's little pig eyes blazed malevolently, and its huge fangs began to drip as if in anticipation of the feast to come.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE TALE OF A MULE.

"Jee-hos-o-phat, a grizzly!" yelled Pete, as he gazed at the quarter of a ton of angry bruin, "and we've not got even a bean shooter."

"That's what Maud was scared at," was the ridiculous thought, considering the circumstances, that came into Jack's mind. That Pete had thought the same thing was evidenced the next instant.

"Say, if we'd only paid attention to Maud," he began, "we'd——"

But a sudden interruption cut him short. The big log they had been trying to dislodge was, as has been said, very delicately balanced. Already by placing their hands on it and rocking it testingly they had disturbed its equilibrium. Now Pete, in his agitation, had placed a foot on it. Both feet, in fact, as he jumped backward at the sight of the huge bear

This was too much for the trunk. With a crash and a roar, and accompanied by a might cascade of dust and rocks, it rolled down the steep, shaly bank.

A few moments before both Pete and Jack had longed above everything else to see the trunk spanning the break in the trail. Now, however, when it landed fair and square in the position desired, with its two ends resting on solid ground, the natural bridge it formed was the last thing in the world they wanted to see.

With the trail still open—that is, with the break still in existence—they might have saved themselves from the bear, for it was extremely unlikely that the creature could have found a foothold on the loose shaly bank. Now that the bridge was in existence, however, things were altered, the bear could cross to them at will, even if they took refuge on their own side of the gap.

“Make for those trees,” shouted Pete, pointing to a small clump of scrubby firs that grew out of a pile of rock just above where Maud had been tethered.

Without a word Jack turned and made the best

of his speed along the steep, slippery incline to the spot indicated by the cow-puncher. Pete was close behind him.

"Now climb," ordered Pete; "it's our only chance."

As he spoke the grizzly, which had hesitated for a moment when the bridge came tumbling down, had perceived the easy means it afforded him of reaching his prey, and was cautiously testing it with his foot.

"Wish the thing would give way and roll him down to kingdom come," gritted out Pete, savagely.

Both Pete and Jack in their haste had found refuge in the same tree, a small sapling fir, which bent perilously under their weight. From this insecure perch they watched bruin testing the bridge cautiously. Finally having made up his mind it was safe the immense brute started to lumber across it.

"B-b-but," stammered Jack, "he'll get us in this tree, Pete. Grizzlies can climb."

The boy was horribly frightened, and small blame can attach to him therefor. Jack, as we

have seen, was far from being a coward, but even the bravest of men might be pardoned for feeling alarm when caught weaponless by a grizzly bear—one of the most savage, merciless foes of man in the Western Hemisphere.

“He can climb, all right,” rejoined Pete, “but a grizzly is the most cautious brute there is. He’s quite smart enough to see that this tree overhangs a steep slope that ends in a precipice, and he knows, too, that if too much weight is put on it we’ll all go down together. Maybe he won’t try to dislodge us. That’s our only hope.”

“But even if he doesn’t climb it he’s liable to sit below till we come down from hunger or drop from fatigue.”

“Well, that’s a chance we’ve got to take,” grunted Pete grimly.

The grizzly seemed in no particular hurry to proceed. Having crossed the bridge he leisurely sniffed about, only from time to time glancing up out of his little red eyes at the two figures in the flimsy fir tree.

All this time Maud had been plunging about

like a wild thing, but her rope held tight and she could not escape.

"Poor critter," said Pete, as he watched her. "If we'd only taken her warning we might have been out of here by now."

"If we ever get out of this, I'll believe anything a mule tells me," chimed in Jack miserably.

The grizzly apparently made up his mind suddenly that it was time that all delays were over. With the peculiar lumbering gait of these huge, but active, creatures, he rapidly made his way to the foot of the little fir and placed his fore paws on it. As Jack gazed downward at the huge paws, armed with enormous claws, each as big and sharp as a chilled steel chisel, he could not restrain a cry.

"Steady, kid, steady," groaned Pete. "Oh, if only I had a rifle for you, me haughty beauty, wouldn't I drill a nice hole in you."

He shook his fist at the bear, which growled savagely back. But having tested the tree, the bear, as Pete had expected, declined to risk his weight on it. Instead he shook it a little in a vain attempt to dislodge the two clinging oc-

cupants. Both man and boy hung on with grim desperation, while a dreadful fear that the roots might give way gnawed at the heart of each.

"How long will he stay there, do you think?" asked Jack, as the grizzly, grumbling angrily to himself, sat down at the foot of the tree, for all the world like a huge cat patiently watching a mouse hole.

"Dunno," grumbled Pete; "longer than we'll stay here, I guess."

Suddenly the bear seemed to tire of inactivity. With a savage roar he sprang at the tree, which bent like a sapling under his tremendous weight. To Pete's horror he distinctly felt the trunk crack.

"It's all off," he groaned aloud; "one more jump like that will finish us."

"When the tree hits the ground you run," whispered Pete to Jack. The boy nodded his head. He little dreamed what was in Pete's mind.

The acute mind of the grizzly soon perceived that his attack on the tree had been effectual. Roaring with dreadful note that sent a chill to Jack's heart, he charged once more.

There came a dreadful crashing, crackling, rending sound, and the small sapling gave way.

Like a stone from a catapult Jack felt himself strike the ground violently.

"Run, Jack, run!"

It was the voice of Pete, but it came to Jack like a voice in a dream. Mingling with it came the triumphant roar of the grizzly.

Bruised and shaken by his fall, the boy managed somehow to get to his feet and began running stumblingly forward. Suddenly he stopped. What had become of Pete?

In the same instant his friend's unselfish bravery flashed across him. Pete meant to stay behind and deliberately sacrifice himself while Jack got a chance to escape.

Jack turned and began to run back.

"Pete, Pete, you shan't do it!" he cried desperately.

But even as he yelled he gave a shrill cry of mortal terror. The huge black form was upon the cow-puncher, and all Jack could see was its huge, hairy arms as they shot out to envelope Pete in their grip. Over and over rolled the two,

as the bear missed its footing on the treacherous hillside and began toppling down toward the trail. In this predicament it still gripped tight to its prey, however.

Suddenly Jack gave another yell—a cry of exultation. An extraordinary thing had happened.

In its rolling plunge down the slope the bear had come within the radius of Maud's iron-shod hind hoofs. With a scream of mingled fear and mulelike defiance, those formidable weapons drove out as if impelled by steel springs.

Ker-flo-p-p-p!

Both of those terrible heels struck the grizzly fair and square in the top of his ferocious head. With a howl of agony he dropped the man from his deadly grip, and with the blood streaming from the deadly wound went tumbling and clawing in his death agony down the slope.

Faster and faster he crashed downward, tearing out small bushes and trees as he went under his huge weight. At last everything grew silent, and Jack looked over the edge of the gulch.

At the bottom, half hidden among the avalanche of brush he had brought with him, lay the

carcass of the huge grizzly—quite dead, it seemed, for when Jack hurled down a stone he never moved.

At the same instant Pete sat up, a puzzled expression on his face.

“Am I dead?” he inquired.

“No, thanks to old Maud!” shouted Jack, joyously flinging his arms about Pete and doing a war dance of exultation. “She’s the best one-eared mule in the world!”

“That’s right,” agreed Pete solemnly, after he had been made acquainted with the happenings of the last few moments, for he had lost consciousness in the bear’s mighty hug.

“And say, Pete,” said Jack in a choky voice, “I understand what you did, old man, and——”

His voice broke, and tears came into his eyes as he thought of Pete’s act of self-sacrifice.

“Aw blazes,” said Pete, with a bit of a quaver in his own tones, “that’s all right. But look at Maud, will you?”

That intelligent animal, with her one ear cocked erect as if in triumph, had thrown back her head and opened her mouth.

"Is she going to have a fit?" asked Jack.

"Naw, she's going ter sing. Mules don't speak often, but when they do, they do it about something worth while. Hark!"

He-haw-he-haw-he-haw-he-haw!

Maud's song of triumph, as Pete had described it, went echoing up and down the cañon in the most discordant series of sounds known to the ear of man. But if there had been a hundred Mexicans in earshot, neither of the two fugitives would have grudged Maud her vocal exercise, nor have attempted to cut it short.

As it was, however, the mule's pean of victory had evidently reached other ears than those of Jack Merrill and Coyote Pete. They were still petting her and wishing for lumps of sugar and gold head stalls and all sorts of equine delicacies when both were startled by a gruff voice addressing them.

"Hullo, strangers!"

"Hullo yourself!" rejoined Pete, considerably surprised, and peering about him keenly.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE TREASURE OF THE MISSION.

The effect of their first sudden immersion into the total blackness of the tunnel was paralyzing to Ralph, the professor, and Walt Phelps. The air, too, was still oppressive and musty with the accumulation of ages.

"Has any one got a match?" was the professor's first inquiry.

"Don't know," rejoined Walt Phelps, "I most generally have, but them greasers went through me pretty thoroughly. Hold on, though; wait! Hooray! I had a hole in my pocket, and some slipped through into the lining of my coat."

"Light up," said Ralph eagerly, "and let's see what sort of a horrible hole we are in."

A sputter, a crackle, and then a blessed flood of light, as Walt Phelps lit one of the precious matches of which he had found three or four.

"Now, see how much you can take in in one match-length," urged the red-headed ranch boy, as he held the match high in the air.

Its radiance showed them that they were in a narrow, walled tunnel, into which the steps from the trap-door above had led them. Right ahead stretched blackness, behind was blackness, only in the little illuminated circle in which they stood in fact, was there any relief from the gloom. The professor uttered a sudden gleeful exclamation, and at the same instant Walt dropped the match with a loud exclamation of:

"Ouch!"

He had held on to it so long he had burned his fingers.

"Never mind," consoled the professor; "that match, Walter, has shown us one important thing."

"And what is that?" asked Ralph.

"That there is an opening to this passage somewhere."

"Why, how——"

"Simple enough. The flame flickered, as Walter held the match up. That shows there must be

a draught, and where there is a draught there must be an opening."

"Then, for goodness sake, let's make for it," exclaimed Ralph, stumbling forward in the darkness; "I can't stand this blackness much longer."

With his hands spread in front of him the boy started off, the others following. Walter would have lighted another match, but this the professor vetoed. He argued that, not knowing what lay ahead of them, they had better reserve their store for a real emergency. The boys agreed to this readily.

They had gone about two hundred yards when Ralph, whose hands were feeling along the walls as he went, gave a sudden exclamation. Up to this point the passage had been about six feet in height, and four or more in width. Now, however, it contracted until they had to double up, and could only just squeeze through. It grew unendurably hot, too, and as the floor had steadily declined as they went, they argued that they must have reached a considerable depth.

Ralph's exclamation had been caused by a peculiar substance with which his fingers had sud-

denly come in contact. Heretofore the walls had been rough, and in places rocky. Suddenly, however, his fingers encountered a rounded, smooth surface.

"What's the matter?" asked the professor, who was behind.

"I don't know. There's something odd imbedded in the wall right here. Can we spare a match?"

"I think under the circumstances we might," said the professor.

Walter accordingly kindled a fresh lucifer.

As its rays shone out, every one of the party shrank back with a cry of horror.

From the wall a grinning skull was gazing at them.

The ranch boy dropped his match with a cry of terror and startled alarm. Even the professor's nerves were shaken by this sudden apparition.

"F-f-for g-g-goodness' sake, strike another!" stuttered Ralph.

With trembling hands Walt struck another light, and this time they nerved themselves to ex-

amine the wall more carefully. The skull was imbedded in the rock, and by its side they now perceived was a skeleton hand, pointing down the tunnel. The professor also noted some marks at its side. There were five of them—short, straight lines, scratched in the wall.

“Why, boys,” he said, as the match died out, “there is nothing to be alarmed at. The skull is placed there as some sort of a pointer, or indicator, as I take it. That hand shows the direction in which the treasure lies, and the five scratches mean either five feet, or five yards, in this direction.”

This simple explanation nerved the boys wonderfully, and they carefully paced off five feet.

“Another match, Walter,” ordered the professor.

“The last but one,” said the boy, as he struck it.

Hastily they gazed about them, but not a sign could they perceive of any break in the wall or floor, which might serve as a hiding-place for the treasure indicated in the miner’s invisible writing.

“Shall we try at five yards?” asked Ralph.

"We will put it to a popular vote," rejoined the professor. "It will mean burning up our last match, but on the other hand——"

"I'm willing to use it—how about you, Walt?" came from Ralph.

"Sure," responded the ranch boy.

The professor made rapid mental calculations, and then paced off the additional distance necessary to make up the five yards from the original starting-place.

"Now," he said, coming to a halt.

How carefully Walt Phelps nursed that tiny yellow flame, as it burst into being. How eagerly they glanced about them, greedy of every morsel of its light.

Suddenly the professor gave a cry.

"Look!" he sputtered out.

He was pointing downward excitedly. Almost at his feet was a mildewed iron ring. As the light died out, he grasped it.

"Never mind the darkness, now; I've got it!" he cried exultingly.

"Pull it up," urged Ralph, all else forgotten in the mystic spell of hidden treasure.

"Yes, pull," urged Walt.

"I—ugh—ugh!" grunted the professor, putting all his strength into it, but the ring never budged an inch.

"Here, give me a hand, boys!" he cried.

"How are we to find you?" asked Ralph.

"Here, extend your hands. Ah, that's it," went on the scientist, seizing hold of the boys' wrists and guiding them down to the ring.

"Now, all together," he said; "pull!"

With all their strength the three adventurers tugged with a mighty heave at the iron. At first it seemed that it was going to prove obdurate even to their combined efforts, but continued tugging resulted in a slight quiver of whatever the iron ring was fastened to.

"Now, once more—he-a-ve!"

There was a sudden give on the part of the iron ring, and its foundation gave way with a rush.

A strange, pungent odor filled the air!

"I—I—I'm choking," gasped Walt, gripping his collar with both hands and tearing it open, to

relieve the terrible congestion that had suddenly seized upon his throat.

"Run, boys; run for your lives!" shouted the professor. "There's something deadly in there!"

They needed no second invitation. Forward they plunged, gasping and choking, in the grip of the unseen, destructive agent they had liberated.

The professor, as he sprang forward, felt his foot slip, and realized that he was falling backward. As he fell into what he knew must be the pit they had opened, and from which the noxious fumes were pouring, he grasped at something—it was Walt's leg.

"Hey, leggo my leg!" howled the red-headed youth, half-crazy with fear. To his excited imagination, it seemed that in the darkness some pulling arm had reached up from the pit and seized him.

"Walt! Walt!" gasped the professor. "Save me!"

The boy, in agony as he was from the horrible gases, pluckily reached round and felt about. Presently he felt the professor's bony hand grip

his. A second later, the scientist had been hauled out of danger. But the suffocating fumes still filled the passage. They were choking, blinding and killing the adventurers.

"Forward, forward! It's our only chance!" cried the professor.

Suddenly he felt Walt, who was just ahead of him in the panic-stricken flight, collapse. Seizing the fainting boy in his arms, the professor bravely struggled on. In the meantime Ralph had hastened on ahead, and knew nothing of what had occurred behind him.

Rapidly he ran from the unseen peril, covering the ground swiftly. Stumbling blindly forward, he all at once felt the air grow fresh and sweet, and at the same time a sort of glow penetrated the stygian darkness of the tunnel.

The boy glanced upward and gave a cry of delight. Above him, at the mouth of a circular shaft, he saw the kindly stars blinking. Never had the sight of the sky looked so sweet to him. But even as he was congratulating himself, he looked about for his companions.

They were not there!

"Hullo, Walt—professor! Hurry," he called back into the blackness and the foul danger he had left behind him.

To his dismay, his voice echoed hollowly upon the rocks, and went booming mysteriously down the tunnel. But human reply to his call, there was none.

With a sinking heart, Ralph realized in an instant what had happened. The professor and his companion had been overcome, by whatever it was that had emanated from the trapdoor in the tunnel.

A sort of panic seized on the boy.

He shouted and shouted, again and again, regardless of his voice being heard above. But only the mockery of the echo to his frightened cries came back to him.

It is no disparagement to Ralph to say that it required some effort on his part to nerve himself for what he did then. Summoning every ounce of resolution in his body, he threw himself on his hands and knees, with a vague recollection of having heard somewhere, that deadly gases were less deadly near to the ground.

Thus extended, the Eastern boy, with a beating heart and a dread sense of disaster oppressing him, crawled back into the danger-filled darkness from which he had just emerged.

As he proceeded, the air grew more and more unbearable. His skin seemed to be on fire, and his eyes were filled with an aching, burning, smart that was maddening. But the boy kept repeating over and over to himself the words he had uttered as he plunged back over the path of danger.

"I must get them out. I must get them out!"

In the pitchy darkness, with mind and body burning, he painfully wriggled on.

"I can't keep this up much longer," was his thought; "where are they, oh, where are they?"

Suddenly he bumped into something soft. It was a human body.

"Professor!" gasped the boy in a voice which he knew must be his own, but which sounded strangely like that of another person.

A faint groan answered him.

"You must come with me. I must get you out. I must get you out," gasped Ralph. He seized

the other's clothes and made a brave effort to drag him forward. But as he did so, everything seemed to race round and round in his head in a mad whirligig, and the boy collapsed in a senseless heap beside the two he had come to save.

CHAPTER XIX.

JIM HICKS, PROSPECTOR.

The sharp eyes of Coyote Pete were not long in discovering the cause of the startling interruption to the adulation of Maud.

Through a clump of brush some distance above the trail, a strange, wild face was peering at them. Yet, despite its tangle of beard, and the battered hat which crowned its tangled locks, the countenance was a kindly one, and there was friendliness in its blue eyes. Above all, it was the face of an American. Pete, and Jack, too, for that matter, would have thrown themselves rejoicingly on the neck of the most disreputable of their countrymen, if they had happened to meet him at that moment.

"Traveling?" inquired the stranger, coming out from his concealment and disclosing a well-knit body dressed in plainsman's garb. The butt

of a revolver glinted suggestively on his left thigh.

"Reckon so," rejoined Pete.

"Whar frum?"

"South."

"Whar to?"

"North."

"Ain't very communicative, be yer, stranger?"

"Wa'al, you see, we ain't had a regular introduction," rejoined Pete, with range humor, a grin spreading over his countenance.

"My name's Jim Hicks; I'm prospecting up through this yer God-forsaken place."

"Mine's Peter Aloysius Archibald De Peyster," rejoined Coyote Pete, and, although he then gasped in amazement, Jack was later to learn that this was the redoubtable cow-puncher's real name. In fact, he had had more than one fight on account of it.

"Don't laugh," he warned.

"Not a snicker," was the reply, "but that sure is a fancy name, stranger. Sounds like a Christmas tree, all lights, and tinsel, and glitter."

"Humph," rejoined the cow-puncher, glancing

sharply at the other, but, perceiving no sign of amusement on that leathern countenance, he went on, "and this is my young friend, Jack Merrill, the son of Merrill, the cattle-man."

"Say," burst out Jack, who had been doing some thinking, "are you J. H.?"

"That is my usual initials," rejoined the prospector, bending a keen glance on the boy.

"Ho—ho—ho!" laughed Pete, "I reckon we crossed your trail to-day. Did you mislay a washpan?"

"Why, yep," rejoined the other, a rather embarrassed look coming over his face, and a bit of red creeping up under the tan, "you see, I was camped down the trail last night, when the all-firedest thing happened that I ever bumped into."

"What was it?" asked Jack mischievously, scenting here an explanation of the occurrences of the night.

"Why, I was sound asleep down by the creek, when, all of a sudden, I hear'n a fearful racket above me. I looked up and I seen a devil with red eyes and a blue tail, all surrounded by blue fire, coming toward me, and——

"Hold on, stranger—wait a minute. I ain't through yit. Wa'al, sir, I out with my pepper box and let fly, but the critter, whatever it was, jes' giv' the awfulest laugh I ever heard, and vanished in a cloud of blue smoke."

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Jack, while Pete joined in the merriment, holding his sides.

The prospector looked at them suspiciously.

"Why—why—why," gasped Pete, "barrin' the red fire and the trimmings, I reckon your devil was jes' our old mule, Maud."

"That onery, one-eared critter yonder!" yelled the prospector, "that perambulating, four-legged accumulation of cats'-meat scare me out of two years' growth! Stan' aside, strangers——"

"Why, what are you going to do?" exclaimed Jack in a somewhat alarmed tone, as the prospector's hand flew to his six-shooter.

"Jes' ventilate the promiscuous disposition of that animal of your'n, stranger."

As he spoke, he coolly raised his pistol, preparatory to sweeping it down and firing point-blank at poor Maud. But Coyote Pete was on him with a wild yell.

"Here, here, none of that in this camp, stranger," he bellowed, as his mighty arms bore the astonished prospector to the ground, and they rolled over and over; "ef you've got any nuggets lyin' loose you don't want, give 'em to us to decorate that noble creature, but you'll shoot me afore you shoot Maud."

As for Jack, after his first alarm, all he could do was to roar with laughter at the two big Westerners rolling about on the ground, and filling the air with vigorous expletives.

"Here, here, get up," he cried at length. "Aren't you ashamed of yourselves?"

The two stopped their struggle for a moment and scrambled to their feet.

"I'll take back my remarks about your mule," said the prospector, apparently unruffled by the sudden strenuous interlude.

"And I'll withdraw my objection to you on account of that bullet you fired at us last night," said Pete solemnly.

"Accepted," said the ranger with equal gravity, "and now, if you two fellers feels like sciffin'——"

"Scoffing?" said Jack. "I thought we'd had enough of that."

"He means eating," chuckled Pete. "What a question to ask!"

"Wa'al, then, I'm camped about a quarter of a mile frum here, and will be glad to have your company. I come down to find out what was the matter, when I hear'n that mule critter of yours a-singin' once more. Glad to have met congenial company."

"We'll have to bring the mule," said Jack.

"All right. So long as she don't fight with my outfit, I've no objection," rejoined the prospector; "but come on, or that rabbit stew will be getting burned."

"Rabbit stew!" exclaimed Coyote Pete. "Oh, I never thought to hear them words again."

Rapidly they retraced their steps, leading Maud by her hitching rope. Soon they reached a small branch path, which they had not noticed on their way up. It led back into the brush where Jim Hicks, it appeared, had camped. As they neared it, a savory odor of rabbit stew became apparent. Pete sniffed ecstatically.

"Say, stranger," he asked in a trembling voice, "is they—is they onions in that stew, or does my nose deceive me?"

"Mr. De Peyster," rejoined the prospector, "your organ of smelling is kerrict, sir. There is four of the finest Bermudas obtainable in tha' rabbit stew."

"Hold me," murmured Pete to Jack, a sudden look of lassitude coming over his weather-beaten face.

"Why, why, what's the matter?" exclaimed Jack in some real alarm.

"I—I think I'm going to faint, and I forgot to bring my smellin' salts," grinned Pete, favoring the boy with a portentous wink.

The formality of the West did not permit Jim Hicks to ask any questions of his guests. In fact, in that section of the country such a procedure would have been adjudged a terrible breach of good manners. On the border every man's business is his own, and no questions asked.

When, however, three or more helpings of rabbit stew had become a part of Coyote Pete, and

an equal number was being assimilated into the person of Jack Merrill, the cow-puncher took advantage of the temporary absence of Jim Hicks—who had gone to see after his ponies—to ask Jack if he thought it wise to tell the prospector some of their story.

“I certainly do,” replied Jack. “He is a queer character, certainly, but under all his peculiarities he seems to be shrewd and kindly.”

“That’s what I think, too,” agreed Pete. “He may be able to help us.”

After Coyote Pete and Jim Hicks had their pipes lighted, therefore, for the prospector carried a good supply of “Lone Jack,” Coyote Pete began. The prospector listened with many exclamations of surprise to their story, till they reached the part concerning the old Mission of San Gabriel. Then he jumped to his feet, and, dashing his pipe to the ground, applied a few vigorous epithets to Black Ramon and his gang.

“That’s the bunch of coyotes that drove me out of there just as I was about to make my fortune,” he cried.

“Drove you out of there?”

"Make yer fortune?" cried his two puzzled listeners.

"Yep; listen," and Jim Hicks told them substantially the story, which we have already perused in his notebook, so providentially delivered into the hands of the prisoners of the old church. The man who willed it to him was a dying recluse he had aided.

"And there the book is, written in with onion juice stuffed in a cranny of the wall for any one's finding and nobody's reading," chuckled the prospector in conclusion. "It was the only thing I could do. You see, I didn't know whether those greasers would catch me or not, so I concluded the best thing to do would be to take no chances, and hide it."

"You think you can find it again?" asked Jack, fascinated by the old prospector's strange story.

"Why, I dunno, son. You see, I was in such a hurry to get away when I heard them fellers coming, that I just stuffed it in a crack in the wall. If they got inquisitive they could easy get it out, but they wouldn't suspect nothing, for the book looked blank."

"But how did you escape without their seeing you?"

"Ah, you've got to trust an old borderer for that," grinned Jim Hicks. "You see, when I got near the church, thinks I to myself, 'now, Jim Hicks, you don't want to burn your bridges behind you, so I just left my pony hidden in a little arroyo about half a mile away. When I heard them coming by the front of the place, I slipped out the other side and into the brush. After a lot of wriggling about through the scrub, I reached my pony, and rode back up here to where I had my outfit cached.'"

"Then you don't know whether there's treasure there or not?" asked Jack.

"Wa'al, there's treasure there all right, no doubt o' that. That Spanish fellow—I told you how I helped him when he was dying—swore he didn't lie to me, and I believe him. But he hinted at there being some sort of difficulty in the way of getting at it. The breath of death, I think he called it. Guess he meant the greasers' garlic."

"I guess so," responded Jack; "how I wish

that we could go with you right now and explore the secret tunnel."

"Wa'al, we've got to get in communication with the ranch first, and then we can get the greaser troops and get after that band of scallywags," said Pete.

"And we must be two days' ride from it now," sighed Jack. "In the meantime, what will be happening to the others?"

"That's the trouble," mused Pete, "if only we'd had a chance, we might have struck out and got the troops ourselves. But the greasers cut us off, and we're of more use here, even as out of the way as we are, than we would be in Black Ramon's clutches."

"Tell yer what," exclaimed Jim Hicks suddenly, "you don't hev ter ride all ther way to ther ranch."

"What's that?" asked Pete.

"No. I mean what I say. Use the telephone."

"What?"

Jack and Pete looked at the eccentric prospector as if they thought he had gone crazy in good earnest.

"Oh, I'm not locoed. Has your father got talk bo' at the ranch, boy?"

"Yes," rejoined Jack.

"Then it's easy."

The prospector spoke with such easy confidence that, in spite of themselves, Jack and Pete began to pay serious attention to his words.

"Oh, yes; I suppose we jes' climb a sugar-pine and asked Central ter give us Grizzly one twenty-three?" inquired Pete, sardonically.

"Nope," rejoined the miner, quite unruffled; "but hain't yer never thought that there's a telephone at the big water dam?"

"Thunders of Vesuvius, that's right!" exclaimed Pete, leaping to his feet and executing a jig.

"How do we get there, though?" asked Jack. "We must be miles from it."

"Not so very far. I know a trail across the mountain that'll get us there a whole lot sooner than you'd think possible."

"Oh-diddy- dd diddy-dum; Dum-dididdy- dee!" hummed Pete cutting all sorts of capers, "oh, now won't we get after those greasers."

"When can we start?" asked Jack.

"Sun up to-morrow."

"Good. I won't rest easy till I know that we're on the way to save Ralph and the others."

CHAPTER XX.

RALPH A TRUE HERO.

“Ralph!”

The voice sounded in the boy's ears like the chiming of a far-away bell. Lying prone on the floor of the tunnel, overcome by the foul gases, he had been unconscious, he did not know for how long, when he felt his shoulders roughly shaken and Walt Phelps' voice in his ear.

His head ached terribly, and he felt weak and dizzy, but he struggled to reply.

“Oh, Walt, what is it? What has happened?”

“Why, we've all been knocked out, I guess,” said Walt; “but the gas must be escaping, now, for although my head still feels as if a boiler factory was at work in it, I can think and feel.”

The professor's voice now struck in as he recovered consciousness.

“Boys!” he exclaimed. “Are you there?”

"Yes, yes, professor; do you feel strong enough to move?"

"I think so. It is important that we should get out of here at once. I imagine that the gas must have become so distributed by this time that it has lost its harmful effect, but we must get to the open air."

"I agree with you," chimed in Ralph.

"What, Ralph, my boy, you here?" exclaimed the professor. "Why, you were far in advance. How do you come to be with us now?"

As modestly as he could, Ralph related how he had turned back into the black tunnel.

"That was bravely done, bravely done, my boy," exclaimed the professor warmly.

Even in the darkness Ralph colored with pleasure, as Walt added his praise to the scientist's.

Soon after they started for the entrance of the tunnel once more, Ralph having told them of his discovery of the shaft.

"Possibly there are steps cut in it. Let us hope so," said the professor. "If there are not, we shall be as badly off as before, for we cannot get back through the tunnel."

"No," said Ralph with a shudder, "I would not face the horrors of the place again for a whole lot."

A careful investigation of the shaft soon revealed, to their great joy, that a flight of steps had indeed been cut in it, doubtless to enable the old Mission dwellers to ascend and descend from the surface of the earth when they desired.

"The question now is," said the professor suddenly, "where are we? On what sort of ground will these steps lead us out?"

"Give it up," said Walt. "I should judge, though, we must have come a mile or more through the tunnel."

"Quite that," agreed the professor.

"Well, the only way to find out our location is to climb up and see what we come out on," said Ralph, to put an end to the hesitation. "Who'll be first up?"

There was quite an argument over this, the professor declaring that, as he was the eldest, he ought to assume the danger. Ralph ended it by springing on to the first of the rough and slippery steps himself.

"Come on," he cried, though in a lowered tone.

A few seconds of climbing brought the boy to the mouth of the shaft. It was quite thickly overgrown with brush, and had evidently not been used for many years. For an instant Ralph hesitated before he shoved through the scrub surrounding the entrance, but when he did so, and stood outside the natural barrier with the professor and Walt Phelps beside him, he uttered an exclamation of unbounded astonishment, which was echoed by his companions.

Before them the moon was rising, tingeing the tops of the distant range with a silvery light. The illumination also flooded the scene before them.

They stood in a sort of vast, natural basin, of considerable extent, surrounded by rocky walls.

"It's a sunken valley," exclaimed Ralph.

And so it was, in fact.

"Look at the cattle and horses, will you?" cried the practical Walt Phelps, who had been gazing about him.

"Sure enough. There must be several score

head of stock in here," was Ralph's astonished cry.

"Say," exclaimed Walt suddenly, "do you know what I believe?"

"What?" inquired Ralph.

"That by accident we have stumbled upon Black Ramon's pasturage."

"What!—the place where he keeps the stolen cattle and horses?"

"That's the idea."

"Say, I believe you are right, and, speaking of that, there's something very familiar looking about that little buckskin pony, feeding off there." Ralph pointed at a small animal cropping the grass some ten rods away. "If that isn't Petticoats—the one that tumbled me into the canal—I'll lose a bet, that's all."

"I believe you're right," cried Walt Phelps; "and that other pony beyond, is the dead spit of Firewater, Jack Merrill's favorite mount."

"And, if I mistake not, that large, bony animal yonder, regarding me with a suspicious optic, is the equine I bestrode at the time we were cap-

tured," exclaimed the professor, who had been looking eagerly about him.

"Boys, this is a wonderful discovery," he went on. "I have read of these sunken valleys, but have never seen one before; I should like to examine the geological formation hereabouts."

"Some other time," laughed Ralph; "what I wonder at is that the Mexicans never discovered the secret passage."

"That's not surprising," chimed in Walt Phelps, "the mouth of it is all screened with thick brush, and unless you fairly fell into it you would never know it was there."

"That is so," agreed the professor, "but now, boys, that we are once more in the blessed air, what are we to do?"

"My advice would be to press on till we can find some village. Once there, we shall be safe, and can find some soldiers, or, at least, summon them from wherever their garrison may be. It is our duty to Jack Merrill and Coyote Pete to use every means in our power to save them," said the professor, who, of course was, like his companions, ignorant of the fact that at that very

minute the two he spoke of were riding over the distant foothills for their lives.

This also explained why the party that had just emerged from the tunnel were not molested. Every man that could be spared from immediate guard duty had been summoned to help form the great human circle, which, as we know, Ramon had attempted to spread about Jack Merrill and the sagacious cow-puncher.

"There doesn't seem to be anybody about," said Walt, after a short silence, "let's get in the shadow of the rock wall and creep forward."

"Better yet, if we only had some rope," suggested Ralph.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, both Petticoats and the other two ranch horses seem to be friendly, why couldn't we ride them?"

"The very thing, if only we could make hackamores," cried Walt.

As Ralph had remarked, the ranch horses had come closer, and were sniffing curiously. To the boy's delight, he now saw that they had halters on. As is often done in the West, when the start

had been made from the ranch the bridles had been placed on over the halters, so that when the Mexicans turned the stolen ponies loose, being too lazy to remove the halters, they had left them in place.

"Coax 'em," whispered Walt, holding out his hand flat, as if he had something in it.

Ralph and the professor did the same, and, hesitatingly, and with many snorts, the ponies drew closer, including the professor's raw-boned mount. As they suddenly gathered up courage, and came right up to the boys, each seized his pony by the halter. The professor followed their example instantly.

"Now, to mount," said Walt. "By hookey, I tell you I feel better when I get a pony under me again."

But the boys' attention was suddenly diverted to the professor, who was endeavoring to mount his tall animal, which stood meekly awaiting the conclusion of his efforts. The professor had never mounted a bareback horse before, and imagined, apparently, that the correct method was to shin up the quadruped's forelegs. The boys,

notwithstanding their risky situation, could not forbear roaring with laughter at his comical efforts.

"Put one hand on his withers, and the other on his back, and then spring upward," said Walt; "you'll find it easy, then."

The professor obediently doubled his long legs under him, placed his hands as directed, and gave a mighty spring.

Bump!

Such a mighty leap did he give that he overshoot the mark, and came down in a heap on the other side. He gave a groan as he alighted.

"What's the matter?" demanded Ralph, almost doubled up with laughter at the weird spectacle.

"Ch, boys, I am in pain. I've landed on my os ridiculosus."

"Your what?" shouted Walt.

"My os ridiculosus—my funny bone. Ouch!"

The professor groaned aloud as he held his elbow and rocked back and forth. The big, bony horse looked meekly around at him, as much as to say: "Don't blame me, it wasn't my fault."

"Here, we'll give you a hand," said Walt, com-

ing around to the professor's side and leading Firewater. Ralph followed his example. Together they hoisted the professor on to the back of his scrawny mount.

"Why, this feels like sitting on a clothes horse," grumbled the professor, as he felt the bony elevation of the gray's spinal column.

"Never mind, can't be helped," laughed Ralph, springing on Petticoats' broad back, while Walt mounted Firewater, "we'll make a circus rider of you yet, professor."

"Not on this horse, please," remonstrated the man of science, as all three animals were urged to a fast trot.

The boys decided that as there was no one in sight, the Mexicans had left the valley unguarded for the night, and so did not hesitate to make all the speed they could. As a matter of fact, the valley was seldom visited except when a shipment of stolen cattle or ponies was required. It was, as the professor had said, a natural basin from which there was but one outlet, and that the boys were shortly to find.

For some time they rode along in the dark

shadow of the rocky walls, which varied in height from about twenty feet to small precipices of a hundred feet or more.

"Say, it looks as if there wasn't any way out of this basin," began Ralph finally, in an impatient tone.

"There must be," replied Walt; "otherwise, how did they get the cattle and ponies into it?"

"Dropped 'em from a balloon, by the looks of it," rejoined Ralph, with a good-natured laugh at his own stupidity.

"Indeed, it looks as if such might have been the case," said the professor, "for all the visible sign there is of a pathway."

"Hold on! What's that there, dead ahead of us?" exclaimed Walt suddenly.

He had been riding a little in advance, and now drew rein abruptly and pointed to a darker shadow which lay against the gloom of the rock wall.

"Looks like a path," admitted Ralph.

"It's a camino, sure enough," cried Walt, the next instant."

"A what?"

"A camino, a trail, you know."

"Well, I don't care what you call it, so long as it gets us out of here," exclaimed Ralph, eagerly pressing forward.

As Walt had guessed, the darker shadow, on closer investigation, proved to be a rugged trail leading at a steep incline out of the sunken valley. In a few seconds after its discovery their horses' hoofs were clattering up it.

"Great heavens, if there is any one about they'll think there's a charge of cavalry coming," cried Ralph.

"Can't be helped," rejoined Walt, "we've nothing to muffle them with. In any event, if they were to discover us, we shouldn't stand a chance."

But they reached the apparent summit of the trail, and a rough gate, without adventure. It was only the work of a few instants to open the portal, and, after riding a few hundred yards, they found themselves on a billowy expanse of rolling foothills. Far off flashed lights, and to their north the vague outlines of the Sierra de la Hacheta faintly showed.

"Where are we going to ride to, now?" asked Ralph.

"Anywhere away from those lights," rejoined Walt, pointing behind them; "that's the mission. I guess they are looking for us now, and it's going to be 'bad medicine' if they get us."

"Oh, dear," groaned the professor, "I cannot imagine any worse punishment than riding this bony brute. His backbone makes me feel like being seated on a cross-cut saw."

"Never mind, professor, if we can only strike a town of some sort, we shall soon be out of our misery," laughed Ralph. "Come on, then, forward!"

He kicked Petticoats' fat sides, and the little buckskin leaped forward, followed by the others. All that night they rode, and by daybreak reached a small village—a mere huddle of huts, in fact. But it had its dignitaries, as they were soon to find out. As they clattered down its main street, scores of raggedly clothed, brown-skinned natives came out to gaze at them, but not one offered to do anything. Walt had a little Spanish at his command, and, selecting one man, who seemed

slightly more intelligent than the rest, he told him they were travelers in need of food and rest. The man seemed to comprehend, and nodded with a grin. Beckoning to the party, he led them forward to a large adobe building at the other end of the one street, which practically comprised the village.

He ushered them in with a bow, after they had dismounted and tied their horses outside. The boys found themselves facing a little, paunchy man, with an air of vast importance investing him. He asked a few rapid questions of their guide in Spanish, and then issued an order to a ragged-looking fellow standing by his side.

"I guess he's gone for breakfast," mused Ralph; "queer way of doing things, but anything for something to eat."

But in a moment the ragged man reappeared without food, but with several others as ragged as himself. The boys noticed they all carried rifles.

The first ragged man beckoned to them, and the fat, paunchy official waved his hand in token of dismissal. He also bowed low. The boys and

the professor, not to be outdone in politeness, also bowed low. Then they followed their guide. He led them round behind the adobe which they had just left, and approached a small building.

"The dining-room, I guess," said Walt cheerfully, as the three stepped through a narrow doorway into a dark interior.

"I don't see any table or—— Great Scott, what's that?" broke off Ralph suddenly.

The door had closed with a clang, and they heard the big bar on the outside being placed in position.

"Hey, there, let us out!"

"What are you doing?"

"Where's our breakfast?"

These exclamations came in chorus from the travelers. For an instant there was silence without, and then came a snarling sort of cry, which sounded very much like a contemptuous:

"Yah-h-h-h-h!"

Furiously the two boys fell on the stout door and shook it. It remained as firmly rooted in position as rock.

"We're prisoners once more," gasped Ralph.

CHAPTER XXI.

AT THE IRRIGATION DAM.

Bright and early, before the last stars had faded, in fact, Jack Merrill and Pete eagerly roused Jim Hicks for the trip to the water company's dam. Both of them hated the idea of losing a minute on this important errand. Once awakened, Jim Hicks proved a nimble person, and breakfast was soon dispatched, his animals packed and saddled, and Maud made ready. No time was lost in hitting the trail when these preparations had been concluded. Jim Hicks was a born trailer, and led the two travelers over the ragged ways of the rough mountains in a skillful manner that excited even Coyote Pete's admiration.

At noon they ate a hasty meal and then pressed on. Jim Hicks promised to land them at the dam at about dusk. Controlling their impatience as best they could, Jack Merrill and Coyote Pete

rode obediently after the prospector. One change had been made in the cavalcade since noon. One of the packs had been transferred to Maud, while another pack had been taken off one of the other ponies and had been distributed between two of his brethren. This left two ponies for Coyote Pete and his young companion to ride.

After this change they pressed on far more quickly, and shortly before sundown their guide halted on the top of a ridge and pointed downward.

Far below them they could see an immense silvery sheet of water—a small lake, in fact. Its surface shimmered in the dying light, and, at another time the two travelers would have admired the sight of the mirror-like sheet of water in its natural frame of rock and ragged timber. Now, however, their thoughts were riveted on the idea of getting to the 'phone, and, by the tiny filament of wire, summoning powerful aid for their beleaguered companions.

"Purty, ain't it?" asked Jim Hicks softly.

"Shouldn't have imagined they'd ever have got

such a lot of water together out here,” grunted Coyote Pete. “Where’s it all come from?”

“Partly from damming up the creek, and partly from the water that pours off the higher ridges when the snow melts in the spring. We’re purty high up here, you know.”

“Well, that’s a pretty good showing for a country where the rainfall isn’t more than four inches a year,” commented Coyote Pete.

“Not that, sometimes,” put in Jim Hicks, “and, by the same token, if this wasn’t summer I should say we were in for some rain now.”

He looked overhead, and Jack noticed that the sky, which had been cloudless not very long before, was now black and overcast. A heavy element was in the air, too—an oppressive sort of feeling.

“Come on, let’s be getting down the slope,” said Coyote Pete suddenly, and once more they moved onward. As they threaded their way down the narrow trail, Jack’s mind reverted to the destroyed bridge.

“How far should you imagine that bridge was below here?” he asked.

"You mean where the bridge was, I reckon," grinned Jim Hicks, who had heard the story of the Mexican's trick, from Jack and his companion. "Well, I should judge about five miles from here."

"Then we are on the Mexican side of the canal cañon?"

"Yep; but we'll soon be on American soil, sonny, don't forget that."

"Not likely to," rejoined Jack fervently.

After half an hour's riding, the great water-works came into full view. There was a massive containing-wall of cement, with a pathway along the top, and in the center the trailers could see the machinery used for opening and closing the sluice pipes that fed the irrigation canal. Word was telephoned from the land company's offices in Maguez to the dam-keeper regarding the pressure to be used, and, in accordance with their instructions, he turned on more or less.

At the near side of the dam was a small building in which the dam-keeper made his home. From its roof there extended a pole, from which, to Jack's intense delight, they could see a thin

wire stretching off to the north. On that wire now depended so much that Jack almost felt like taking his hat off to it and to the inventor of telephones.

"Geddap!" urged Jim Hicks, cracking his quirt about the haunches of his pack animals. The little cavalcade broke into a brisk trot. The dust spurted from under their rattling hoofs.

"We're coming on in style," laughed Jack, as they came briskly down the last few rods of the trail.

"Don't see old Simmons about," commented Jim Hicks, looking for some sign of the dam-keeper. "Guess he's taking a snooze some place. Hey, Sam! Sam!"

"Here he comes," said Jack briskly, as the door of the dam-tender's hut opened. But the next moment every member of the approaching party gave a gasp of dismay. Jim Hicks spasmodically jerked up his rifle to his shoulder, but instantly lowered it again.

From the door of the hut there had stepped out, not old Sam Simmons, the dam-tender, but—Black Ramon and six of his men!

They held their weapons grimly leveled at Jack Merrill and his companion, while Ramon sharply bade them dismount.

"We have prepared for you what we must call a little surprise party," he said. "Please tie your horses and we will go inside."

Resistance was useless, and they obeyed.

* * * * *

To understand how this came about, we must revert for a moment to events which had been taking place at the old Mission and at the Rancho Agua Caliente while we have been following the young adventurers and their companions. We left Mr. Merrill and his cow-punchers riding back toward the ranch with heavy hearts, bearing with them the wounded Mexican, from whom they hoped to gain some information concerning Black Ramon's whereabouts.

On the arrival of the disconsolate party at the ranch house, Mr. Merrill had at once sent out a call to his neighbors, and they came riding in from miles around to a consultation. All agreed that it would be a grave invasion of international law to send an armed party over the border, but

it was agreed that, providing the Mexican recovered it would be legitimate to surround Black Ramon's rendezvous—that is, if the prisoner revealed it—and demand the surrender of the prisoners. The Mexican authorities would then be informed and, if possible, Black Ramon given over to justice.

This course would have been followed at once but for two reasons. Mr. Merrill and his brother ranchers felt that to act prematurely might ruin everything, and the wounded Mexican obstinately refused to get better. Still another obstacle, was the great chasm left by the blowing up of the bridge. It would be impossible to pass this. Just when this difficulty seemed in its most serious phase, an old rancher spoke up and volunteered to guide the party by a secret trail he knew of, which led over the mountains and across the border.

As he spoke, the wounded Mexican, who for better attention and observation had been laid on a cot in the living room of the ranch house, stirred uneasily.

“Hullo, he’s coming to,” exclaimed Mr. Mer-

rill bending over him, but the man's eyes remained closed, and he seemed, to all intents and purposes, as badly off as he had been before. For two days he remained thus, and the ranchers carried on their consultations freely before him, little dreaming what a hornets' nest they were preparing to bring down about their own heads. On the morning of the third day, when Mr. Merrill awakened he was astonished to find that the Mexican's cot was empty. The man was gone! A search showed that he was not about the place, and a further investigation revealed the fact that one of the best horses on the ranch was missing.

The wounded Mexican had been "playing possum" just as a wounded animal will sometimes do, awaiting but the slightest relaxation of vigilance to be up and off.

The consternation this caused may be imagined. If the man understood English, and there seemed little room to doubt that he did—otherwise he would have had no object in deceiving them as to his real condition—the ranchers' plans must by this time be known to Black Ramon. Mr. Merrill was in despair for a time, but finally, as a last

recourse, and even at the risk of upsetting everything, he decided to call up Los Hominos, a considerable town in Chihuahua province, and request that soldiers be sent in pursuit of Black Ramon.

None knew better than Mr. Merrill the danger he thus incurred of having his plans doubly revealed to the chief of the cattle rustlers. The country posts of the Mexican army are largely recruited from men in sympathy with the lawless element—especially if that lawless element confines itself to preying on Americanos. There was, therefore, a grave risk that some traitor in the ranks might convey the news of Mr. Merrill's request to Black Ramon. That it was no time for doubts or hesitation, however, every rancher felt, and on the top of Mr. Merrill's message preparations were at once made for a start across the border by the ranchers themselves.

In the meantime, the captured Mexican, whose wound, though severe, still allowed him to ride, was spurring on his way across the Hachetas to Black Ramon's headquarters in the old Mission. It has been said that the greatest blackguards

have sometimes the most faithful followers, and this seemed to be the case with the Mexican miscreant, for his underling, despite the pain of his wound and his weakened condition, did not hesitate an instant over taking a ride which might have caused even a slightly wounded man to pause and reflect on the undertaking.

Thus it had come about, that, at the same time that Jack Merrill and Coyote Pete, escorted by the eccentric prospector, were setting out to get in communication with civilization, Black Ramon and six of his most trusted followers had started for the land company's dam, with what a heinous purpose in view we shall presently see. The Mexican was in the blackest of moods. He had hardly returned from his vain chase after Jack Merrill and the cow-puncher before word had been brought to him that his other prisoners had escaped.

The Mexican was almost beside himself with rage as he heard this, and, in addition, news had been brought to him that Mr. Merrill had requisitioned that a band of soldiers be sent in search of him. Armed also with the wounded man's

story of the pursuit of the ranchers by means of the secret trail, Ramon was indeed almost desperate when he set out with the intention of accomplishing the deed he had in mind. He felt he would render his name hateful to Americans and glorious to border Mexicans forever, and was all the more anxious to achieve it for that reason.

His astonishment, therefore, when he heard Coyote Pete's hail and emerged from the dam-tender's hut to find his escaped prisoners walking right into his net again, was only equalled by his delight. As his followers bound each of the three hand and foot, after roughly dragging them from their ponies, Black Ramon rubbed his hands gleefully.

"You are going to see a sight before long that you will remember all your days," he said, as the Americans, scornfully disdaining to utter a word, were carried into the hut.

"What, you do not answer?"

"No, you yellow dog," grunted Jim Hicks disdainfully, "I'm mighty particular who I talk to."

Beside himself with fury at the American's calm contempt, the Mexican opened his palm and

struck the bound and helpless miner a blow across the face. Jim Hicks' ruddy, bronzed countenance went white as dead ashes.

"You'll be sorry for that, you greaser, some day," he said in a quiet, controlled tone, which to those who knew him signified trouble.

"Some day, yes!" laughed Ramon; "but I shall be far away some day, amigo, but before I go I am going to give you Americanos a lesson you will never forget. The father of this boy here, and twelve other rancheros, are riding through the American foothills now to your rescue. But they will never reach the mountains. Why?—Ah, you will soon see."

As they were carried into the hut and thrown roughly on the floor, Jim Hicks' eyes espied poor Sam Simmons, the tender of the dam. The employee of the water company was also bound hand and foot, and seemed to have been beaten into submission by the brutal Mexicans. He gave a slight groan as he saw the plight of the newcomers, but made no other sign.

"He resisted us," laughed Black Ramon

harshly, "see what happened to him. It is a good thing you gave in without making trouble."

As he spoke, there came a long, low grumble that shook the earth and made the furniture in the hut rattle. It was the near approach of the storm the captives had noticed impending. At the same instant, there came a dazzling flash of lambent lightning. It illumined the cruel faces about them as if a flickering calcium had been thrown upon them.

The advancing storm seemed to have a strange effect on Sam Simmons; he stirred in his thongs and a pitiful expression came over his bruised face.

"The storm! the storm!" he cried. "Hark! it is coming. Let me out to tend the gates."

"Not likely," sneered Black Ramon, turning from him contemptuously.

"But the sluices must be opened. The rain is coming!" cried the old man, seemingly galvanized into life by the call of duty. "Let me loose, I say."

"Be quiet," snarled Ramon. "Do you want another dose of the same medicine?"

The old man quivered pitifully, while the others looked on with eyes that burned with indignation.

"If they are not opened, the dam will burst," begged the old man. "It is weakened now, I tell you. It cannot stand the pressure of more water. Let me up, and then you can tie me again."

Ramon seemed suddenly interested.

"You say that if the sluices are not opened the dam will burst?" he asked.

"Yes, yes! Let me up, I must open them. I——"

"Silence! And if they burst what will happen?"

"Why, the whole valley from here down is a trough! The water will rush down and destroy many lives and acres of property. Let me up, for Heaven's sake, Ramon, or if you will not let me do it, open the sluices yourself. You do not know what you are doing—every moment counts."

Again the thunder roared, and a blinding flash illumined with a blue, steely radiance the strange scene in the old dam-tender's shanty. In the

brief period of lighting, Jack Merrill surprised a wickedly radiant look on Ramon's face. At the same instant a few heavy drops of rain fell on the roof.

"Hark! The rain!" cried the old man; "for mercy's sake, let me out. It is my duty."

"Which you will not perform to-night," sneered the Mexican, as the storm increased; "this storm saves us the use of dynamite."

In one dreadful flash of insight, Jack Merrill realized the Mexican's terrible plan. He had intended to blow up the dam and flood the valley below. The storm had taken the work out of his hands. The heavy rain-fall would swell the dam till the weak containing wall broke. In a few short hours every ranch in the course of the bursting dam would be devastated. Yes, that was what the fruit rancher at Maguez had told them. And there was nothing he could do but lie there powerlessly. The boy's brain seemed to be on fire, but in his veins was ice.

Suddenly Black Ramon spoke. For an instant Jack thought he had repented, but his words dashed that hope almost as it was born. The

Mexican issued a sharp order to two of his men.

“Screw down those sluice gates till not a drop escapes,” he said. “We do not want to have to wait too long.”

CHAPTER XXII.

A BOLT FROM THE BLUE.

Outside the shanty the storm roared and flashed. The rain pelted in torrents. Suddenly there came a sharp ringing at the telephone instrument. It seemed to have a note of insistence it it. The Mexicans exchanged glances. Here was an unexpected interruption. The instrument connected on a direct wire with the land company's offices. If one of the Mexicans answered it, the possibilities were that a warning would be spread that the dam was being tampered with.

Ramon solved the difficulty. Without untying the old man, he had two of his men support him to the telephone. Another held the receiver to Sam Simmons' ear.

Black Ramon drew his revolver and held it to the other ear.

"Now, if you utter a word of warning, I'll

scatter what brains you have," he warned viciously.

In a trembling voice Sam Simmons answered the call.

"Y-y-yes, the storm is here," Jack heard him answer, evidently in reply to some question at the other end.

"Y-y-yes, I will open them, sir. Y-y-yes, I know the dam is weak."

"Don't hesitate," warned Black Ramon vindictively.

"Y-y-you'll send the engineers to-morrow, you say? Very well, sir."

"Evidently they know of the storm in the valley," thought Jack to himself; "shouldn't wonder if the old man himself warned them some time ago, before he was tied."

This was, in fact, the case. But now the old man's hesitancy grew more painful than ever.

"T-t-they're asking about you," he said, turning to the Mexican.

"Tell them you haven't seen me," snarled Ramon.

"No, I have seen nothing of him," whimpered

the old man feebly. "Kidnapped some boys, you say—the ranchers are after him—and the soldiers, too——"

"There, there, that will do," said the Mexican impatiently. "When the dam bursts, those Americanos will be drowned like so many rats, and the soldiers will find an empty nest for their pains."

"G-g-good-bye. I will attend to it," quavered the old dam-tender. After responding to further warning from the other end of the wire, he was removed from the telephone and the receiver was replaced.

At the same instant the two Mexicans who had been despatched to the dam to close the sluice gates returned. Their evil smiles showed that they had done their duty well. The rain had now increased to a torrent and the small gauge on the side of the dam-keeper's hut showed that the water was rising rapidly.

"How long before the dam goes?" asked Ramon, bending over the old man, who was moaning and crying pitifully over the idea of his treachery.

"She can't last more than half an hour," he whimpered. "Oh, what shall I do? They will think it was my fault. They——"

There came a roar so dreadful that the hut seemed to be shaken like a leaf in a windstorm. At the same instant a blue glare filled the hut, hissing viciously like a nest of aroused serpents. A sulphurous odor permeated everything. Before any of the occupants of the place had time to move a step an explosion so loud that it seemed as if a ton of dynamite had detonated, rent the air.

Jack's eyes were almost blinded by the sudden glare and crash, and his senses reeled for an instant. The next moment, however, he realized what had happened. The hut had been struck by a thunderbolt.

Black Ramon, his clothing singed, stood in a dazed way in the center of the smoking hut—in the floor of which a great, jagged hole had been ripped. By his side stood two of his men. The rest lay senseless, perhaps dead, in various parts of the reeking place.

One of them had been hurled by the violence

of the electrical shock close to Jack's side, and his knife lay within an inch of the boy's fingers. Bound as he was, however, he could not reach it, nor did he dare to move while the Mexican leader's eyes were on them.

Suddenly the cattle rustler's superstitious mind seemed to recover from its daze. He gazed about him in a wild way.

"It is the judgment of Heaven," he cried. "Let us escape."

Followed by the two of his men who still retained their senses, he dashed from the hut.

In an instant Jack rolled over on his side and seized the haft of the Mexican's knife in his teeth. Then he rolled over to Coyote Pete's side.

"What the dickens——" began the cow-puncher, but stopped short as Jack, still holding the blade clenched in his teeth, laid the keen blade across Pete's ropes. The knife was as keen as a razor, and in a few seconds Coyote Pete's hands were free. Then he took the knife and severed his leg bonds. A few seconds more and Jack was free, and, in less time than it takes to tell, old Sam Simmons and Jim Hicks were also on their feet.

"Quick, get their weapons," urged the cow-puncher, and instantly all four possessed themselves of the four unconscious Mexicans' knives, pistols and rifles. Black Ramon and his men, in their superstitious fright, had rushed from the place in such a hurry that they had neglected to disarm their followers.

"Now for the ponies," exclaimed Jim Hicks.

"Hold on a moment," shouted Jack. He dived out of the hut into the blinding rain. But old Simmons was ahead of him. Already the old man had sped along the top of the dam, and while the weakened breast wall of masonry shook under his feet with the great pressure behind it, had screwed open the sluice gates. Far below them a yellow flood boomed and roared and screamed its way to the valley, but the pressure on the dam had been relieved and the masonry stood.

All this took some time, and in the meanwhile Coyote Pete and Jim Hicks had cautiously crept from the hut and gone to look for the horses. They found them unharmed, but of Black Ramon there was no sign. They learned afterward that his animals had been left down the trail, so

as not to alarm old Simmons when they crept on him and surprised him. As soon as the Mexican had found himself outside the lightning-blasted hut, he had lost no time in mounting his black, and speeding back to his rendezvous at the old mission. He had, of course, no idea but that the boys and the old dam-tender would go to their death with the hut when the dam collapsed.

Suddenly Jack thought of the telephone. He ran back into the hut and telephoned the glad news of the safety of the dam to the amazed office in Maguez. Also he gave them a brief sketch of what had happened.

"But what the——" came a brief voice at the other end, but already Jack had rung off and was outside, where Jim Hicks and Coyote Pete had the ponies.

They had held a hasty consultation, and had decided that inasmuch as the soldiers were advancing on the mission, and the American ranchers were on their way, that their best plan would be to head back toward the valley. But it was Jack who vetoed this plan.

"I want to be in at the finish of those rascals,"

he exclaimed, "and, besides, think of our friends imprisoned in that dismal old church."

"You're right, kid," shouted Coyote Pete, waving a dripping hat in the downpour, "the mission it is."

Old Simmons had been too badly shaken by his encounter with the Mexican for it to be advisable to leave him alone. Maud's pack was therefore removed, and the old dam-tender mounted on her. First, however, a call was sent for a "relief." Till the latter arrived the sluices were to be left open to drain off the heavy surplus of water.

"Wished I knew where them greasers' horses were," sighed Jim Hicks; "they'll be coming to in a minute, and walkin' bein' a healthy exercise, I'd like to provide some of it for them."

A short distance down the trail they found the miscreants' ponies, just as Ramon had left them hitched. Even the fair-minded Jack did not protest when Coyote Pete and Jim Hicks, with yells of glee, cut the cayuses loose and sent them galloping off.

"I only wish we could be here to see the Mexi-

cans' faces when they wake up and wonder what's hit 'em," said Jim, who had examined each of the stunned men and ascertained that not one of them was seriously hurt.

"Now, then, forward!" cried Jim, as soon as the clatter of the retreating Mexican ponies' hoofs had died out.

"Forward!" echoed Jack again, putting his heels to his mount.

With a loud shout, the four Americans dashed down the trail.

"Now look out for fireworks! Yip-yip-yip-y-ee-e-ee!" yelled Coyote Pete, in a voice that rivaled the last efforts of the retreating thunderstorm.

CHAPTER XXIII.

WITH THE RURALES.

After shouting for an hour or more, Ralph and Walt grew tired of the exercise. As for the professor, with his usual philosophy he had made the best of the situation by surveying their prison, which was a small, barn-like building of adobe. There was nothing very remarkable about it, except that three Americans had been imprisoned there for no apparent reason.

At nightfall they were brought some food, and frantic efforts were made by Walt to interrogate the Mexican who served them, but to no avail. The fellow only shook his head stupidly, and pretended not to understand.

"Whatever are we locked up here for, anyhow?" demanded Ralph, for the fiftieth time, as they ate their evening meal.

"Give it up," said Walt with a shrug.

"You don't think it can have anything to do with Black Ramon, do you?" inquired the professor.

"Not likely," rejoined Walt; "even down here there is some law and order, and the townsfolk of this place, whatever it is, would hardly be in league with a band of robbers."

"Then what do you suppose they have detained us for?"

"As I said before, Ralph, I give it up. Maybe it's for having red hair and looking suspiciously like Americans."

Soon after some blankets were thrown in to them, which they spread on the not overclean floor, and, being tired out, were soon asleep. In the morning they were awakened, and passed a long, dreary day in the semi-darkness.

"I can't stand this much longer," Ralph burst out, on the second night of their imprisonment. "If something doesn't happen soon, I'm going to escape."

"How?" inquired the practical Walt, gazing about at the thick walls and the small windows of their place of captivity.

"I don't know how, but I will, you can bet," said Ralph decisively.

"Well, I'm going to sleep," said Walt; and, accordingly, he curled himself up in his blanket and was soon wrapped in slumber. The professor followed his example, but Ralph could not sleep. What, with worry over their own situation and wondering how his friends, whom he believed were still captives in the mission, were faring, his eyes were wide open till past midnight.

At that hour the quiet of the village was disturbed by a sudden sound—the trample of horses' hoofs and the clanking of metal.

"Black Ramon has found out we are here and is coming for us," was Ralph's first thought.

But the trampling went on, and suddenly a bugle call sounded.

"Soldiers!" exclaimed Ralph.

Hastily he awoke the others, and, after a prolonged period of listening, there was little doubt from the military character of the sounds outside that the newcomers were indeed troops.

"Maybe they are out after the brigands," gasped Ralph, in a hopeful tone.

"If only we could see their commander and explain our predicament to him," wished the professor.

"And get laughed at for your pains," supplemented Walt.

In the morning, so early that the dawn was still gray, their jailer aroused them. Wondering what could be going to happen, the boys hurriedly put on the few clothes they had taken off the night before, and, with the professor, obeyed his signal to follow him.

They were quickly conducted before the short, pursy man, who had committed them to their cell. Now, however, he was all smiles and condescension.

The reason for this may have lain in the fact that a smart-looking officer of the Mexican cavalry stood by his side and eyed the boys with interest as they came in. He was in command of the troops that had arrived the night before, and which, though the boys had not guessed it, were the ones summoned from Los Hominos.

It now appeared that the fat dignitary could

talk passable English when he chose, and, as the boys entered, he greeted them with an airy:

“Good morning.”

“Good morning,” sputtered Ralph, indignation taking the place of prudence. “You ought to beg our pardons. What have we done to be locked up like criminals? We demand a hearing. We——”

“There, there,” said the stout man soothingly; “all is well. This officer has told me that in all probability you are respectable, and——”

“In all probability?” burst out the professor, “I am Professor Wintergreen, of Stonefell College, and this young man is my charge, Ralph Stetson, and this other gentleman is Walter Phelps, the son of a rancher.”

“The names I have on my list as being among those imprisoned by Black Ramon,” interrupted the officer. “Pray, señors, how did you escape?”

“Tell us first why we are locked up,” demanded Ralph.

“Why, as I understand it, this worthy man, who is mayor of this village, merely had you de-

tained on suspicion. He thought you might be horse thieves, and——”

“Me a horse thief!” shouted the professor.

“You forget your appearance is——” began the officer, but was interrupted by a good-natured laugh from all three of the adventurers. True, they had forgotten how they must have looked after their adventure in the tunnel. Later, when they saw a mirror, they did not blame the fat mayor so much. Plastered with dirt and mud, scratched and ragged, they did, indeed, look unlike the three trim persons who had set out from the American foothills in pursuit of Black Ramon.

“But he could have found out who we were by asking us,” protested Ralph.

“He tells me he was going to do so—to-morrow.”

“You forgot we are in the land of manana,” reminded the professor.

After some more palaver, the mayor signified that the three Americans could have their liberty, and apologized for their detention on behalf of himself and his village.

It was soon explained to the boys by the officer that he was hastening with fifty picked men to round up the rustlers who had long infested that part of Mexico.

"But," he admitted, "had we not fallen in with you, we would hardly have known where to find them."

"No, the last place you would look for them would be in a church," grinned Walt.

Soon after, the boys, having despatched a hasty breakfast, the cavalry set out. The boys rode in advance to guide them to the retreat of Black Ramon and his men. The professor ambled along, sitting uneasily on the saddle which had now been provided for him. It was a long time before he recovered from his bareback ride on the old ranch horse.

"If these fellows are Mexican cavalry, they are all right," said Ralph, admiringly looking at the easy riding and smart equipment of the fifty men under the friendly officer.

"They are rurales," explained the officer; "a section of the army kept especially for hunting brigands and robbers. Most of them are former

brigands themselves, but there are no better men for the work."

By mid-afternoon they came in sight of the old mission, and, as they approached it, the boys gave a shout of astonishment, which was echoed by the professor.

Riding toward them, from the opposite direction, was a band of horsemen. Faster they came in their direction, seemingly spurring onward to destruction.

"Those greasers must be crazy," exclaimed Ralph, gazing at what seemed a suicidal act. "They're riding right at us."

Suddenly a dip in the foothills hid the approaching horsemen, but the thunder of their hoofs could still be heard. Could Ramon have an ambush on the other side of the rise, wondered Ralph.

The same thought must have come to the Mexican officer, for he gave a curt order and his men, bursting into a wild yell, drew their carbines from their holsters and prepared to use them.

"We'll fire when they come over the ridge," whispered the captain to Ralph.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE ROUND-UP.

Closer and closer came the clatter of the advancing hoofs. Presently a horseman's head showed above the ridge.

The almost formed command was abruptly checked on the captain's lips, as the newcomer, followed by twenty others, swept over the ridge.

It was Mr. Merrill, and close behind him came Coyote Pete and Bud Wilson, with Jack Merrill riding alongside.

"Yip-yip-yip-y-ee-ee-ee!" yelled the cowboys, as they saw the Mexican troops.

"Wow!" yelled the Mexicans.

"Hooray!" shouted the boys, and, amidst all the rejoicing shouts, there came a sudden cry of recognition from Jack as his eyes fell on Walt Phelps' mount.

"Firewater!" he cried, and the pony shared his

greetings and congratulations with the three newly-recovered members of the party.

It was soon told how Coyote Pete and Jack, with Jim Hicks and old Sam Simmons, on their way from the dam, had fallen in with the Merrill party near the mission. It was believed that Black Ramon and his men were ambushed there. Then they had decided to make no attack at once, but close in on the place when the troops had been met with, and in this way make the round-up of the rustlers complete.

Ralph, Walt and the professor rapidly told of their escape, and Jim Hicks emitted a whoop when he heard that the treasure had, in all likelihood, been located. Further relation of all their exciting adventures was put aside by them all till Ramon and his band should have been captured.

After a brief consultation, it was decided to advance in a fan-shaped formation on the old mission, gradually closing in as they neared it. If Ramon and his band were ambushed there, they could make deadly defense from its strong walls, and neither Mr. Merrill nor the Mexican

captain were anxious to lose any men if it could be helped.

Accordingly, the line moved cautiously forward till it was within a few hundred yards of the building. Up to that moment the old place had been silent and deserted as a tomb. Suddenly, however, as the attackers advanced, a fusillade was opened from the tower. Lead spattered on the rocks about them, but, fortunately, nobody was hit. Ralph turned rather pale. It was the first time he had ever been shot at.

"Better get behind this ridge," said Mr. Merrill, as the fire grew hotter.

Accordingly, the attacking party dropped low into a gully. The firing instantly stopped.

"If only we could draw enough of their fire to exhaust their ammunition," mused the rancher.

"I have a plan," cried Jack suddenly.

"What is it, my boy?"

"Why can't we elevate hats and caps on rifle-barrels and let them blaze away at those? That would soon empty their ammunition belts."

"A good idea," said Mr. Merrill, while the other ranchers warmly approved. The prepara-

tions to carry out Jack's plan were rapidly made. Soon, what was apparently a head, was poked above the ridge. A perfect fusillade of bullets came showering about it.

"Drop it," cried Jack. "Make it look as if the man was killed."

The ruse worked perfectly. Every time a "head" appeared, a tornado of bullets rattled about it, and the riddled condition of the caps and hats thus held up, bore eloquent testimony to the efficacy of the enemy's marksmen.

Finally, however, the fire began to slacken. Instead of a hail of bullets, only two or three greeted the appearance of a head.

The moment they had waited for had arrived. With a cheer, the full force of rurales leaped from the trenches.

"Come on!" shouted Jack, but Mr. Merrill restrained him.

"Remember, we are in a foreign country, my boy. The rurales must do the work or we shall be in serious trouble."

"Oh, bother," cried Jack, "and I wanted to see the attack."

On swept the rurales, a final fire hailing about them, but a volley from their carbines soon silenced the last feeble attempt at defense.

"I guess the rustlers have about given up," exclaimed Jack.

Suddenly, from the old mission gates there swept out a figure on horseback. It was instantly recognized as that of Black Ramon. He was mounted on his magnificent black horse, and waved his hand defiantly at the advancing line. The rurales poured a perfect storm of bullets at him, but the chief of the cattle rustlers seemed to bear a charmed life. Once he reeled in his saddle as if he had been hit, but he instantly recovered himself.

Spurring his superb mount, he sprang forward over the brow of a protecting ridge, and was lost to view. When he next appeared he was silhouetted in striking outline on the summit of another ridge of foothills. For an instant he paused, and they could see him look defiantly back. Then, with a wave of his sombrero, he vanished. It was useless to pursue him. There was not a

horse among the ranchers or the Mexicans that could approach the big black.

"There goes a rascal that would look better decorating a telegraph pole with a hemp necktie around his yellow throat, than anywhere else," said one of the Americans, as the desperado vanished.

"And yet," said Mr. Merrill, "I should not have wished to see him shot down in cold blood. If only we had our horses and cattle——"

"We'll have them before long," said Ralph quietly, as, with a loud series of yells, the rurales charged into the mission itself.

"What do you mean?" asked Mr. Merrill. The other Americans, watching from the little knoll the attack on the mission, looked at him questioningly.

"We've found them all," announced Ralph calmly, "in the sunken valley——"

"A remarkable geographical 'freak,' if I may use the expression," broke in the professor, "at some remote period of the earth's life——"

"Yip-yip-y-ee-ee-ee!"

Coyote Pete and Bud Wilson set up loud yells,

which were joined in by the other cow-punchers and Americans, as the little Mexican captain could be seen in the distance, waving his sword in token that the cattle rustlers' stronghold had fallen. The whole cavalcade, with a cheer, swept forward, with Jack Merrill, Ralph Stetson and Walt Phelps in the lead. The professor's horse ran away with him in the wild stampede, but luckily, by dint of fastening his bony fingers in its mane, he managed to hold on.

Without a single life being lost, or any wounds received on either side, the band that had so long harassed the border had fallen into the hands of the authorities. Eventually every member of it but Black Ramon was rounded up, including the renegade cow-puncher.

All were placed under escort of the troops, and taken to Mexico City. They are now serving long sentences in Mexican penal institutions. The Border Boys later received the thanks of President Diaz for the part they had played in bringing the outlaws to book. After seeing the prisoners disposed of, of course the Americans had to be shown how the boys and the professor had

effected their escape from the church. With torches and lamps they crowded into the narrow pit, and the hole which had gaped open when the ring was pulled loose soon appeared. Of the noxious gases, however, no trace remained. The air was pure and healthful. The professor ascertained later that the old missionaries who had buried the treasure there, had placed pungent chemicals under the trapdoors, so that, in case of marauding Indians attacking the treasure, it would be safe. The skull and bone, it seemed reasonable to suppose, had been placed in the passage wall as a warning to other visitors. The mysterious noise that had alarmed Ralph remained a mystery for a long time, till one of the prisoners admitted that he had caused it under Ramon's orders, the object being to scare the boys.

The lights of the torches and lamps carried by the party, shone redly into the black hole, and the three Border Boys peered eagerly over. Jack and Ralph, by a common impulse, leaped downward together. Their feet struck the lid of an old wooden chest with a splitting, rending

sound, as the rotten wood gave. The next instant a cheer went up. Jim Hicks' treasure-trove had been found. The flickering lights gleamed on the dull glint of gold coins and ornaments of priceless value.

"Wow!" yelled Jim Hicks; "I'm rich. But so will you boys be, too. I'll take care of that, and you, likewise, Coyote Pete."

In vain the boys protested; Jim Hicks insisted, and long afterward, when the Mexican government's claim had been settled and the treasure appraised, each boy received a crisp check for two thousand dollars. Coyote Pete was also a recipient of the miner's good will.

Among the prisoners taken, was a queer-looking old man, with a long, white beard, and the quick, shifty, dark eyes of an ape. Jack Merrill and Pete gave an exclamation of surprise as their eyes fell on him. It was the old hermit of the cañon! He recognized them, and gave them a baleful scowl.

"It wasn't his fault that Ramon didn't have *us* where we've got *him*," commented Pete.

After remaining camped at the mission for a

day, while final arrangements for the taking of testimony at the cattle rustlers' trials, and the matter of the boys' depositions was attended to, the American party bade farewell to the Mexican captain and his troops and set out for the home-side of the border.

Carefully guarded by several cowboys was a pack horse, carrying the treasure chest. Its contents had been roughly valued at \$75,000.

"Well, Ralph," said Jack, with a laugh, as the boys rode along at an easy lope together, "what do you think of the West now?"

"It's great, Jack," responded Ralph, who had been thinking over the adventures of the last few days.

"But if things had turned out differently," put in Walt.

"No use thinking of that," decided Jack. "All we've got to think about is, that we have had the luck to be the means of cleaning out that bunch of rustlers, and ridding the border of them forever."

"Forever's a long time," commented Mr. Merrill, who had spurred up alongside the boys.

"However, I think you boys have had quite enough adventures for a time."

"I'd like to start out again to-morrow," exclaimed Jack.

"So would I," echoed Ralph.

"Well, you may have a chance before long," said Mr. Merrill enigmatically. He would add nothing further, however.

At Maguez a great reception had been prepared for the returning ranchers. The celebration was held some days later. The boys, their faces suffused with blushes, had to make speeches and describe in part their adventures.

"Three cheers for the Border Boys," yelled the crowd, as Ralph limped through some sort of an oration. Jack had done much better, while Walt Phelps was overtaken with stage fright and couldn't speak at all.

"Well, good-bye to the strenuous life for a while," said Jack, as they rode home after the celebration. Behind them were the yells and whoops of the enthusiastic citizens who were still keeping it up.

"Well, we've been through many dangers and

perils," rejoined Ralph, "but somehow, it's pleasant to look back on them. I hope we will have some more adventures before long."

"Not likely to," commented Walt Phelps.

"Why not?" asked Jack. "Black Ramon is still at large, remember, and somehow, I've got a feeling that as long as he is at liberty he'll make trouble."

"Well, the Border Boys will take care of him every time," shouted Ralph, giving a regular cowboy yell:

"Yip-yip-y-ee-ee!"

It was echoed by the other Border Boys, as they spurred forward for the home ranch, under the clear stars. On and on they rode, their little ponies' feet making the lively kind of music each of them loved best to hear.

All at once they rode over a slight rise—the first "land-wave" to mark that they were approaching the foothills. With yells, the Border Boys dashed down the other side of it and disappeared from the starlit desert trail—and from this story.

But we shall meet the Border Boys again in

further adventures and perils, more exciting than any through which they had yet passed. Ralph Stetson's introduction to frontier life—thrilling as it had been—was but one series of incidents in the lives of the dwellers along "the line."

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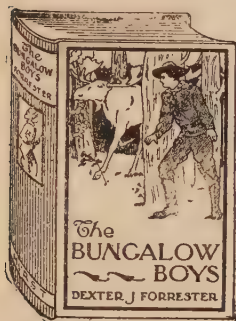
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